The WEIGHT of the CROWN

FRED M. WHITE

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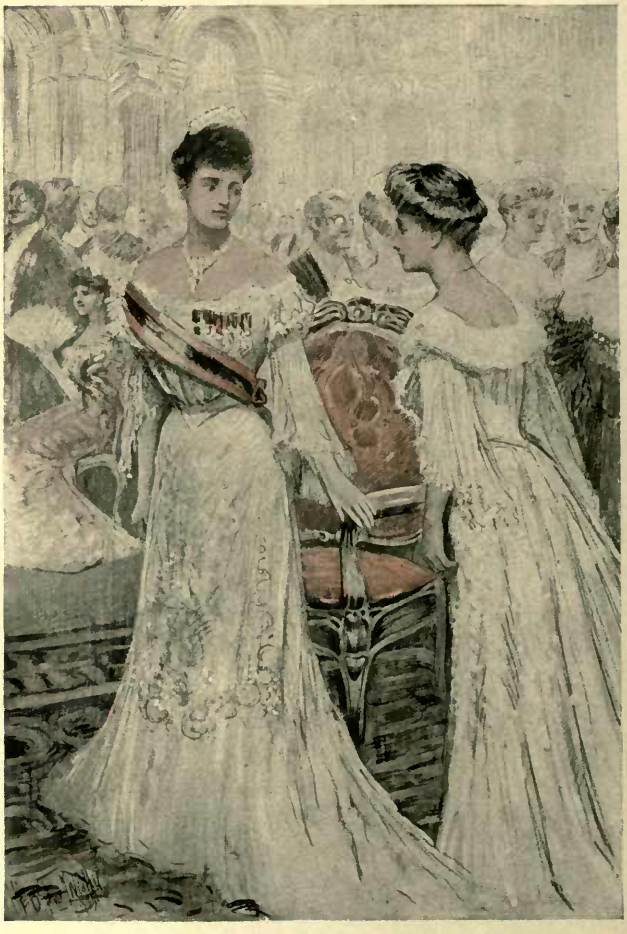

"She was going to have a look at the pictures, she said."

The Weight of the Crown.—Page 28

THE WEIGHT OF THE CROWN

By FRED. M. WHITE

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"Tregarthen's Wife" "The Robe of Lucifer"
"The Crimson Blind" etc.

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THE WEIGHT OF THE CROWN

CHAPTER I

WITHOUT A FRIEND

THE girl stood there fighting hard to keep back the tears from her eyes. The blow had been so swift, so unexpected. And there was the hurt to her pride also.

"Do I understand that I am dismissed, Madame?" Jessie Harcourt asked quietly. "You mean that I am to go at the end of the week?"

The little woman with the faded fair hair and the silly affectation of fashion was understood to say that Miss Harcourt would go at once. The proprietress of the fashionable millinery establishment in Bond Street chose to call herself Madame Malmaison, though she was London to the core. Her shrill voice shook a little as she spoke.

"You are a disgrace to the establishment," she said. "I am sorry you ever came here. It is fortunate for me that Princess Mazaroff took the proper view so far as I am concerned. Your conduct was infamous, outrageous. You go to the Princess to try on hats for her Highness, and what happens? You are found in the library engaged in a bold flirtation with her Highness's son, Prince Boris. Romping together! You suffered him to kiss you. When the Princess came here just now and told me the story, I was——"

"It is a lie," Jessie burst out passionately. "A cowardly lie on the part of a coward. Why did not that Russian cad tell the truth? He came into the

drawing-room where I was waiting for the Princess. Don't interrupt me, I must speak, I tell you."

Madame Malmaison subsided before the splendid fury of Jessie's anger. She looked more like a countess than a shop girl as she stood there with her beautiful eyes blazing, the flash of sorrow on her lovely face. Madame Malmaison had always been a little proud of the beauty and grace and sweetness of her fitter-on. Perhaps she felt in her heart of hearts that the girl was telling the truth.

"I hope I am a lady," Jessie said a little more gently—" at any rate, I try to remember that I was born one. And I am telling the truth—not that it matters much, seeing that you would send us all into the gutter rather than offend a customer like the Princess. That coward said his mother was waiting for me in the library. He would show me the way. Then he caught me in his arms and tried to kiss me. He wanted me to go to some theatre with him to-night. He was too strong for me. I thought I should have died of shame. Then the Princess came in, and all the anger was for me. And that coward stood by and shirked the blame; he let it pass that I had actually followed him into the library."

The girl was telling the truth, it was stamped on every word that she said. Madame Malmaison knew it also, but the hard look on her greedy face did not soften.

"You are wasting my time," she said. "The Princess naturally prefers her version of the story. And she has demanded your instant dismissal. You must go."

Jessie said no more. There was proud satisfaction in the fact that she had conquered her tears. She moved back to the splendid show-room

with its Persian carpets and Louis Seize furniture as if nothing had happened. She had an idea that Madame Malmaison believed her, and that the latter would be discreet enough to keep the story from the other hands. And Jessie had no friends there. She could not quite bring herself to be friendly with the others. She had not forgotten the days when Colonel Harcourt's daughter had mixed with the class of people whom she now served. Bitterly Jessie regretted that she had ever taken up this kind of life.

But unhappily there had been no help for it. Careless, easy-going Colonel Harcourt had not troubled much about the education of his two girls; and when the crash came and he died, they were totally unfitted to cope with the world. The younger girl, Ada, was very delicate, and so Jessie had to cast about to make a living for the two. The next six months had been a horror.

It was in sheer desperation that Jessie had offered her services to Madame Malmaison. Here was the ideal fitter-on that that shrewd lady required. She was prepared to give a whole two guineas a week for Jessie's assistance, and the bargain was complete.

"Well, it was all over, anyway, now," Jessie told herself. She was dismissed, and that without a character. It would be in vain for her to apply to other fashionable establishments of the kind unless she was prepared to give some satisfactory reason for leaving Madame Malmaison. Her beauty and grace and charm would count for nothing with rival managers. The bitter, hopeless, weary struggle was going to begin all over again. The two girls were utterly friendless in London. In all the tragedy of life there is nothing more sad and pathetic than that.

Jessie conquered the feeling of despair for the moment. She had all her things to arrange; she had to tell the girl under her that she was leaving for good to-night. She had had a dispute with Madame Malmaison, she explained, and she would not return in the morning. Jessie was surprised at the steadiness of her own voice as she gave the explanation. But her cold fingers trembled, and the tears were very heavy in the beautiful eyes. Jessie was praying for six o'clock now.

Mechanically she went about her work. She did not heed or hear the chatter of her companions; she did not see that somebody had handed her a note. Somebody said that there was no answer, and Jessie merely nodded. In the same dull way she opened the letter. She saw that the paper was good, she saw that the envelope bore her name. There was no address on the letter, which Jessie read twice before having the most remote idea of its meaning.

A most extraordinary letter, Jessie decided, when at length she had fixed her mind into its usual channel. She read it again in the light of the sunshine. There was no heading, no signature.

"I am writing to ask you a great favour (the letter ran). I should have seen you and explained, but there was no time. If you have any heart and feeling you cannot disregard this appeal. But you will not ignore it, however, because you are as good and kind as you are beautiful. The happiness of a distressed and miserable woman is in your hands. Will you help me?

"But you will help me, I am certain. Come to 17, Gordon Gardens, to-night at half-past nine o'clock. Come plainly dressed in black, and take

care to wear a thick black veil. Say that you are the young person from Forder's in Piccadilly, and that you have called about the dress. That is all that I ask you to do for the present. Then you will see me, and I can explain matters fully. Dare I mention money in connection with this case? If that tempts you, why the price is your own. £500, £1,000 await you if you are bold and resolute."

There was nothing more, no kind of clue to the identity of the writer. Jessie wondered if it were some mistake; but her name was most plainly written on the envelope. It had been left by a district messenger boy, so that there was no way of finding out anything. Jessie wondered if she had been made the victim of some cruel hoax. Visions of a decoy rose before her eyes.

And yet there was no mistake about the address. Gordon Gardens was one of the finest and most fashionable squares in the West End of London. Jessie fluttered over the leaves of the *London Directory*. There was Gordon Gardens right enough —Lady Merehaven. The name was quite familiar to her, though the lady in question was not a customer of Madame Malmaison's. All this looked very genuine, so also did the letter with the passionate, pleading tone behind the somewhat severe restraint of it all. Jessie had made up her mind.

She would go. Trouble and disappointment had not soured the nobility of her nature. She was ready as ever to hold out a helping hand to those in distress. And she was bold and resolute, too. Moreover, as she told herself with a blush, she was not altogether indifferent to the money. Only a few shillings stood between her and Ada and absolute starvation. £500 sounded like a fortune.

"I'll go," Jessie told herself. "I'll see this thing to the bitter end, whatever the adventure may lead to. Unless, of course, it is something wrong or dishonest. But I don't think that the writer of the letter means that. And perhaps I shall make a friend. God knows I need one."

The closing hour came, and Jessie went her way. At the corner of New Bond Street a man stood before her, and bowed with an air of suggested politeness. He had the unmistakable air of the dissipated life; he was well dressed, and handsome, in a picturesque way. But the mouth under the close-cropped beard was hard and sensual; the eyes had that in them that always fills the heart of a girl with disgust.

"I have been waiting for you," the man said. "You see I know your habits. I am afraid you are angry with me."

"I am not angry with you at all," Jessie said coldly. "You are not worth it, Prince Boris. A man who could play the contemptible cur as you played it this morning——"

"But, *ma cherie*, what could I do? Madame la Princess, my mother, holds the purse-strings. I am in disfavour the most utter and absolute. If my mother comes to your establishment and says——"

"The Princess has already been. She has told her version of the story. No doubt she heartily believes that she has been told the truth. I have been made out to be a scullery girl romping with the page boy. My word was as nothing against so valuable a client as the Princess. I am discharged without a character."

Prince Boris stammered something, but the

cruel light of triumph in his eyes belied his words. Jessie's anger flamed up passionately.

"Stand aside and let me pass," she said; "And never dare to address me again. If you do, I will appeal to the first decent man who passes, and say you have grossly insulted me. I have a small consolation in the knowledge that you are not an Englishman."

The man drew back abashed, perhaps ashamed, for his dark face flushed. He made no attempt to detain Jessie, who passed down the street with her cheeks flaming. She went on at length until she came to one of the smaller byways leading out of Oxford Street, and here, before a shabby-looking house, she stopped and let herself in with a latchkey. In a bare little room at the top of the house a girl was busy painting. She was a smaller edition of Jessie, and more frail and delicate. But the same pluck and spirit were there in Ada Harcourt.

"What a colour!" the younger girl cried. "And yet— Jessie, what has happened I? Tell me."

The story was told—indeed, there was no help for it. Then Jessie produced her mysterious letter. The trouble was forgotten for the time being. The whole thing was so vague and mysterious, and moreover there was the promise of salvation behind it. Ada flung her paint brush aside hastily.

"You will go?" she cried. "With an address like that there can be no danger. I am perfectly certain that that is a genuine letter, Jess, and the writer is in some desperate bitter trouble. We have too many of those troubles of our own to ignore the cry of help from another. And there is the money. It seems a horrible thing, but the money is a sore temptation."

Jessie nodded thoughtfully. She smiled, too, as she noted Ada's flushed, eager face.

"I am going," she said. "I have quite made up my mind to that. I am going if only to keep my mind from dwelling on other things. Besides, that letter appeals to me. It seems to be my duty. And as you say, there is the money to take into consideration. And yet I blush even to think of it."

Ada rose and walked excitedly about the room. The adventure appealed to her. Usually in the stories it was the men only to whom these exciting incidents happened. And here was a chance for a mere woman to distinguish herself. And Jessie would do it, too, Ada felt certain. She had all the courage and resolution of her race.

"It's perfectly splendid!" Ada cried. "I feel that the change of our fortunes is at hand. You are going to make powerful friends, Jessie; we shall come into our own again. And when you have married the prince, I hope you will give me a room under the palace roof to paint in. But you must not start on your adventure without any supper."

Punctual to the moment Jessie turned into Gordon Gardens. Her heart was beating a little faster now; she half felt inclined to turn back and abandon the enterprise altogether. But then such a course would have been cowardly, and the girl was certainly not that. Besides, there was the ever unceasing grizzly spectre of poverty dangling before Jessie's eyes. She must go on.

Here was No 17 at length—a fine, double-fronted house, the big doors of which stood open, giving a glimpse of the wealth and luxury beyond. Across the pavement, to her surprise, Jessie noticed that a breadth of crimson cloth had been unrolled. The

girl had expected to find the house still and quiet, and here were evidences of social festivities. Inside the hall two big footmen lounged in the vestibule; a row of hats testified to the fact that there were guests here to dinner. A door opened somewhere, and a butler emerged with a tray in his hand.

As the door opened there was a pungent smell of tobacco smoke, followed by a bass roll of laughter. Many people were evidently dining there. Jessie felt that she needed all her courage now.

It was only for a moment that the girl hesitated. She was afraid to trust her own voice; the great lump in her throat refused to be swallowed. Then she walked up the scarlet-covered steps and knocked at the door. One of the big footmen strolled across and asked her her business.

"I am the young person from Forder's, in Piccadilly," Jessie said, with a firmness that surprised herself. "I was asked by letter to come here at this hour to-night."

"Something about a dress?" the footman asked flippantly. "I'll send and see."

A moment later and the lady's maid was inviting Jessie up the stairs. As requested, the girl had dressed herself in black; she wore a black sailor hat with a dark veil. Except in her carriage and the striking lines of her figure, she was the young person of the better class millionaire's shop to the life. She came at length to a dressing-room, which was evidently about to be used by somebody of importance. The dressing-room was large and most luxuriously fitted; the contents of a silver-mounted dressing-bag were scattered over the table between the big cheval glasses; on a couch a ball dress had been spread out. Jessie began to understand what

was going on—there had been a big dinner party, doubtless to be followed presently by an equally big reception. One of the blinds had not been quite drawn, and in the garden beyond she could see hundreds of twinkling fairy lamps. The adventure was beginning to appeal to her now; she was looking forward to it with zeal and eagerness.

"My mistress will come to you in a moment," the maid said, in the tone of one who speaks to an equal. "Only don't let her keep you any longer than you can help. The sooner you are done, the sooner I shall be able to finish and get out. Good night!"

The maid flitted away without shutting the door. Jessie's spirits rose as she looked about her. There could be no possible chance of personal danger here. Jessie would have liked to have raised her veil to get a better view of all these lovely things that would appeal to a feminine mind, but she reflected that the black veil had been strongly insisted upon.

A voice came from somewhere, a voice asking somebody also in a whisper to put the lights out. This command was repeated presently in a hurried way, and Jessie realized that the voice was addressing her. Without a minute's hesitation she crossed over to the door and flicked out the lights. Well, the adventure was beginning now in real earnest, Jessie told herself. The voices whispered something further, and then in the corridor Jessie saw something that rooted her to the spot. In perfect darkness herself, she could look boldly out into the light beyond. She saw the figure of a man half led and half carried between two women—one of them being in evening dress. The man's face was as white as

death. He was either very ill or very near to death, Jessie could see; his eyes were closed, and he dragged his limbs after him like one in the last stage of paralysis. One of the ladies in evening dress was elderly, her hair quite gray; the other was young and handsome, with a commanding presence. On her hair she wore a tiara of diamonds, only usually affected by those of royal blood. She looked every inch a queen, Jessie thought, as with her strong gleaming arms she hurried the stricken man along. And yet there was a furtive air about the pair that Jessie did not understand at all.

The phantom passed away quietly as it had come, like a dream; the trio vanished, and close by somebody was closing a bedroom door gently, as if fearful of being overheard. Jessie rubbed her eyes as if to make sure that the whole thing had not been a delusion. She was still pondering over that strange scene in a modern house, when there came the quick swish of drapery along the corridor, and somebody flashed into the room and closed and locked the door. That somebody was a woman, as the trail of skirts testified, but Jessie rose instantly to the attitude of self.

She had not long to wait, for suddenly the lights flashed up, and a girl in simple evening dress stood there looking at Jessie. There was a placid smile on her face, though her features were very white and quivering.

"How good of you!" she said. "God only knows how good of you. Will you please take off your hat, and I will . . .? Thank you. Now stand side by side with me before the glass. Is not that strange, Miss Harcourt? Do you see the likeness?"

Jessie gasped. Side by side in the glass she was looking at the very image of herself!

CHAPTER II

A DESPERATE VENTURE

"THE likeness is wonderful," Jessie cried. "How did you find out? Did anybody tell you? But you have not mentioned your own name yet, though you know who I am."

The other girl smiled. Jessie liked the look of her face. It was a little haughty like her own, but the smile was very sweet, the features resolute and strong just now. Both the girls seemed to feel the strangeness of the situation. It was as if each was actually seeing herself for the first time. Then Jessie's new friend began to speak.

"It is like this," she explained. "I am Vera Galloway, and Lady Merehaven is my aunt. As my aunt and my uncle, Lord Merehaven, have no children, they have more or less adopted me. I have been very happy here till quite lately, until the danger came not only to my adopted parents, but to one whom I love better than all the world. I cannot tell you what it is now, I have no time. But the danger to this house and Charles—I mean my lover—is terrible. Fate has made it necessary that I should be quite free for the next few hours, free to escape the eyes of suspicious people, and yet at the same time it is necessary that I should be here. My dear Miss Harcourt, you are going to take my place."

"My dear Miss Galloway, the thing is impossible," Jessie cried. "Believe me, I would help you

if I could—anything that requires courage or determination. I am so desperately placed that I would do anything for money. But to take your place——"

"Why not? You are a lady, you are accustomed to society. Lord Merehaven you will probably not see all the evening, Lady Merehaven is quite short-sighted. And she never expects me to help to entertain her guests. There will be a mob of people here presently, and there is safety in numbers. A little tact, a little watchful discretion, and the thing is done."

Vera Galloway spoke rapidly and with a passionate entreaty in her voice. Her beautiful face was very earnest. Jessie felt that she was giving way already.

"I might manage it," she admitted dubiously. "But how did you come to hear of me?"

"My cousin, Ronald Hope, told me. Ronald knew your people in the old days. Do you recollect him?"

Jessie blushed slightly. She recollected Captain Hope perfectly well. And deep down in her heart she had a feeling that, if things had turned out differently, she and Ronald Hope had been a little more than mere acquaintances by this time. But when the crash came, Jessie had put the Captain resolutely aside with her other friends.

"Well, Ronald told me," Vera Galloway went on. "I fancy Ronald admired you. He often mentioned your name to me, and spoke of the strange likeness between us. He would have found you if he could. Then out of curiosity I asked a man called Beryll, who is a noted gossip, what had become of Colonel Hacker Harcourt's daughters, and he said one of them was in a milliner's shop in Bond

Street, he believed Madame Malmaison's. Mind you, I was only mildly curious to see you. But to-day the brooding trouble came, and I was at my wits ends for a way out. Then the scheme suddenly came to me, and I called at Malmaison's this morning with a message for a friend. You did not see me, but I saw you. My mind was made up at once, hence my note to you. . . And now I am sure that you are going to help me."

"I am going to help you to do anything you require," Jessie said, "because I feel sure that I am on the side of a good cause."

"I swear it," Vera said with a passionate emphasis. "For the honour of a noble house, for the reputation of the man I love. And you shall never regret it, never. You shall leave that hateful business for ever. . . But come this way—there are many things that I have to show you."

Jessie followed obediently into the corridor a little behind Vera, and in the attitude of one who feels and admits her great social inferiority. They came at length to a large double window opening on to some leads, and then descending by a flight of steps to the garden. The thing was safer than at first appeared, for there were roll shutters to the windows.

It was very quiet and still in the garden, with its close-shaven lawns and the clinging scent of the roses. The silent parterre would be gay with a giddy, chattering mob of Society people before long, Vera hurriedly explained. Lady Merehaven was giving a great reception, following a diplomatic dinner to the foreign Legation by Lord Merehaven. Jessie had forgotten for the moment that Lord Merehaven was Secretary for Foreign Affairs.

The big windows at the back of the dining-room

were open to the garden; the room was one blaze of light, that flickered over old silver and priceless glass on banks of flowers and red wines in Bohemian decanters. A score or more men were there, all of them distinguished with stars and ribbons and collars. Very rapidly Vera picked them out one by one. Jessie felt just a little bewildered as great, familiar names tripped off the tongue of her companion. A strange position for one who only a few hours before had been a shop-girl.

"We will walk back through the house," Vera Galloway said. "I must show you my aunt. Some of the guests are beginning to arrive, I see. Come this way."

Already a knot of well-dressed women filled the hall. Coming down the stairs was the magnificent woman with the diamond tiara, the woman who had helped along the corridor the man with the helpless limbs. Jessie elevated her eyebrows as the great lady passed.

"The Queen of Asturia," Vera whispered. "You have forgotten to lower your veil. Yes, the Queen of Asturia. She has been dining here alone with my aunt in her private room. You have seen her before?"

"Yes," Jessie replied. "It was just now. Somebody whispered to me to put out the lights. As I sat in the dark I saw——but I don't want to appear inquisitive."

"Oh, I know. It was I who called to you from my bedroom to put the lights out. I had no wish for that strange scene on the stairs to be. . . you understand?"

"And the sick man? He is one whose name I ought to know, perhaps."

"Well, yes. Whisper—come close, so that nobody can hear. That was the King of Asturia. You think he was ill. Nothing of the kind. Mark you, the Queen of Asturia is the best of women. She is good and kind—she is a patriot to her finger tips. And he—the king—is one of the greatest scoundrels in Europe. In a way, it is because of him that you are here to-night. The whole dreadful complication is rooted in a throne. And that scoundrel has brought it all about. Don't ask me more, for the secret is not wholly mine."

All this Vera Galloway vouchsafed in a thrilling whisper. Jessie was feeling more and more bewildered. But she was not going back on her promise now. The strange scene she had witnessed in the corridor came again to her with fresh force now. The ruler of Asturia might be a scoundrel, but he certainly was a scoundrel who was sick unto death.

"We will go back to my room now," Vera said. "First let me dismiss my maid, saying that I have decided not to change my dress. Go up the stairs as if I had sent you for something. You will see how necessary it is to get my maid out of the way."

The bedroom door was locked again, and Vera proceeded to strip off her dress, asking Jessie to do the same. In a little time the girls were transformed. The matter of the hair was a difficulty, but it was accomplished presently. A little while later and Jessie stood before the glass wondering if some other soul had taken possession of her body. On the other hand, Vera Galloway was transformed into a demure-looking shop assistant waiting a customers' orders.

"I declare that nobody will know the difference," she said. "Unless you are in a very strong light,

it will be impossible to detect the imposture. You will stay here and play my part, and I shall slip away disguised in my clothes. Is that ten o'clock striking? I must fly. I have one or two little things to get from my bedroom. Meanwhile, you can study those few points for instruction that I have written on this sheet of paper. Study them carefully, because one or two of them really are of importance."

Vera was back again in a moment, and ready to depart. The drama was about to begin in earnest now, and Jessie felt her heart beating a little faster. As the two passed down the stairs together, they could see that the handsome suite of rooms on the first floor were rapidly filling. One or two guests nodded to Jessie, and she forced a smile in reply. It was confusing to be recognized like this without knowing who the other people were. Jessie began to realize the full magnitude of the task before her.

"I am not in the least satisfied with your explanation," she said, in a very fair imitation of Vera Galloway's voice. After all there is a great sameness in the society tones of a woman. "I am very sorry to trouble you as the hour is late, but I must have it back to-night. Bannister, whatever time this young person comes back, see that she is not sent away, and ask her in to the little morning room. And send for me."

The big footman bowed, and Vera Galloway slipped into the street. Not only had she got away safely, but she had also achieved a way for a safe return. Jessie wondered what was the meaning of all this secresy and clever by-play. Surely there must be more than one keen eye watching the movements of Vera Galloway. The knowledge thriiled Jessie, for if

those keen eyes were about they would be turned just as intently upon her. A strange man came up to her and held out his hand. He wanted to know if Miss Galloway enjoyed the Sheringham's dance last night. Jessie shrugged her shoulders, and replied that the dance was about as enjoyable as most of that class of thing. She was on her guard now, and resolved to be careful. One step might spoil everything and lead to an exposure, the consequences of which were altogether too terrible to contemplate.

The strange man was followed by others; then a pretty fair girl fluttered up to Jessie and kissed her, with the whispered question as to whether there was going to be any bridge or not. Would Vera go and find Amy Macklin and Connie, and bring them over to the other side of the room? With a nod and a smile Jessie slipped away, resolving that she would give the fair girl a wide berth for the remainder of the evening. In an amused kind of way she wondered what Amy and Connie were like. It looked as if the evening were going to be a long series of evasions. There was a flutter in the great saloon presently as the hostess came into the room, presently followed by the stately lady with the diamond tiara in her hair.

The guests were bowing right and left. Presently the Queen of Asturia was escorted to a seat, and the little thrill of excitement passed off. Jessie hoped to find that it would be all right, but a new terror was added to the situation. She, the shop-girl, was actually in the presence of a real queen, perhaps the most romantic figure in Europe at the present moment. Jessie recalled all the strange stories she had heard of the ruling house of Asturia, of its

intrigues and fiery conspiracies. She was thinking of it still, despite the fact that a great diva was singing, and accompanied on the piano by a pianist whose reputation was as great as her own. A slim-waisted attaché crossed the room and bowed before Jessie, bringing his heels together with a click after the most approved court military fashion.

"Pardon me the rudeness, Mademoiselle Vera, but her Highness would speak to you. When you meet the princess, the lady on the left of the queen will vacate her chair. It is to look as natural as possible."

Jessie expressed her delight at the honour. But her heart was beating more painfully just now than it had done any time during the evening. The thing was so staggering and unexpected. Was it possible that the queen knew of the deception, and was party to the plot? But that theory was impossible. A royal guest could not be privy to such a trick upon her hostess.

With her head in a whirl but her senses quite alert, Jessie crossed the room. As she came close to the queen, a lady-in-waiting rose up quite casually and moved away, and Jessie slipped into the vacant seat. She could see now how lined and wearisome behind the smile was the face of the Queen of Asturia. And yet it was one of the most beautiful faces in the world.

"You are not surprised that I have sent for you, *cherie*?" the queen asked.

"No, Madame," Jessie replied. She hoped that the epithet was correct. "If there is anything that I can do——"

"Dear child, there is something you can do presently," the queen went on. "We have managed

to save him to-night. You know who I mean. But the danger is just as terribly imminent as it was last night. Of course, you know that General Maxgregor is coming here presently ? "

"I suppose so," Jessie murmured. "At least, it would not surprise me. You see, Madame——"

"Of course it would not surprise you. How strangely you speak to-night. Those who are watching us cannot possibly deduct anything from the presence of General Maxgregor at your aunt's reception. When he comes you are to attach yourself to him. Take him into the garden. Then go up those steps leading to the corridor and shut the General in the sitting-room next to your dressing-room—the next room to where *he* is, in fact. And when that is done come to me, and in a loud voice ask me to come and see the pictures that you spoke of. Then I shall be able to see the General in private. Then you can wait in the garden by the fountain till one or both of us come down again. I want you to understand this quite clearly, for heaven only knows how carefully I am watched.

Jessie murmured respectfully that she knew everything. All the same, she was quite at a loss to know how she was to identify the General Maxgregor when he did come. The mystery of the whole thing was becoming more and more bewildering. Clearly Vera Galloway was deep in the confidence of the queen, and yet at the same time she had carefully concealed from her majesty the fact that she had substituted a perfect stranger for herself. It was a daring trick to play upon so exalted a personage, but Vera had not hesitated to do it. And Jessie felt that Vera Galloway was all for the cause of the queen.

"I will lie in wait for the General," she said. "There is no time to be lost—I had better go now."

Jessie rose and bowed and went her way. So far everything had gone quite smoothly. But it was a painful shock on reaching the hall to see Prince Boris Mazaroff bending over a very pretty girl who was daintily eating an ice there. Just for a moment it seemed to Jessie that she must be discovered. Then she reflected that in her party dress and with her hair so elaborately arranged, she would present to the eyes of the Russian nothing more than a strange likeness to the Bond Street shop-girl. At any rate, it would be necessary to take the risk. The prince was too deep in his flirtation to see anybody at present.

Once more Jessie breathed freely. She would linger here in the hall until General Maxgregor came. He would be announced on his entrance, so that Jessie would have to ask no questions. Some little time elapsed before a big man with a fine, resolute face came into the hall.

Somebody whispered the name of Maxgregor, and Jessie looked up eagerly. The man's name had a foreign flavour—his uniform undoubtedly was; and yet Jessie felt quite sure that she was looking at the face of an Englishman. She had almost forgotten her part for the moment, when the General turned eagerly to her.

"I'll go upstairs presently," he murmured. "You understand how imperative it is that I should see the queen without delay. It is all arranged, of course. Does the queen know?"

"The queen knows everything, General," Jessie said. She felt on quite firm ground now. "Let us stroll into the garden as if we were looking for

somebody. Then I will admit you to the room where the queen will meet you presently. Yes, that is a very fine specimen of a Romney."

The last words were uttered aloud. Once in the garden the two hurried on up the steps of the corridor. From a distance came the divine notes of the diva uplifted in some passionate love song. At another time Jessie would have found the music enchanting. As it was, she hurried back to the salon and made her way to the queen's side. One glance and a word were sufficient.

The song died away in a hurricane of applause. The queen rose and laid her hand on Jessie's arm. She was going to have a look at the pictures, she said. In a languid way, and as if life was altogether too fatiguing, she walked down the stairs. But once in the garden her manner altogether changed.

"You managed it?" she demanded. "You succeeded? Is the General in the room next to your sitting-room? How wonderfully quick and clever you are! Would that I had a few more like you near me! Throw that black cloak on the deck chair yonder over my head and shoulders. Now show me the way yourself. And when you have done, go and stand by the fountain yonder, so as to keep the coast clear. When you see two quick flashes of light in the window you will know that I am coming down again."

Very quietly the flight of steps was mounted and the corridor entered. With a sign Jessie indicated the room where General Maxgregor was waiting for the queen; the door opened, there was a stifled, strangled cry, and the door was closed as softly as it had opened. With a heart beating unspeakably fast, Jessie made her way into the garden again and

stood by the side of the ornamental fountain as if she were enjoying the cooling breezes of the night.

On the whole, she was enjoying the adventure. But she wanted to think. Everybody was still in the house listening to the divine notes of the great singer, so that it was possible to snatch a half breathing space. And Jessie felt that she wanted it. She tried to see her way through; she was thinking it out when the sound of a footstep behind caused her to look round. She gave a sudden gasp, and then she appeared to be deeply interested in the gold fish in the fountain.

"I hope he won't address me. I hope he will pass without recognition," was Jessie's prayer.

For the man strolling directly towards the fountain was Prince Boris Mazaroff!

CHAPTER III

ON GUARD

HERE was a danger that Jessie had not expected. She was not surprised to see Prince Boris Mazaroff there; indeed, she would not have been surprised at anything after the events of the last few hours. There was no startling coincidence in the presence of the Russian here, seeing that he knew everybody worth knowing in London, and all society would be here presently.

Would he come forward and speak? Jessie wondered. She would have avoided the man, but then it seemed to be quite understood that she must stay by the fountain till the signal was given. All this had been evidently carefully thought out before Vera Galloway found it an imperative necessity to be elsewhere on this fateful night.

Would Mazaroff penetrate her disguise? was the most fateful question that Jessie asked herself. Of course he would see the strong likeness between the sham Vera and the milliner in the Bond Street shop; but as he appeared to be *au fait* of Lord Merehaven's house, and presumedly knew Vera, he had doubtless noticed the likeness before. Jessie recollected the girls who had greeted her so smilingly in the hall, and reflected that they must have known Vera far better than this rascally Russian could have done, and they had been utterly deceived.

Mazaroff lounged up to the fountain and murmured something polite. His manner was easy

and polished and courteous now, but that it could be very different Jessie knew to her cost. She raised her eyes and looked the man coldly in the face. She determined to know once for all whether he guessed anything or not. But the expression of his face expressed nothing but a sense of disappointment.

"Why do you frown at me like that, Miss Vera?" he asked. "What have I done?"

Jessie forced a smile to her lips. She could not quite forget her own ego, and she knew this man to be a scoundrel and a coward. Through his fault she had come very close to starvation. But, she reflected, certainly Vera could know nothing of this, and she must act exactly as Vera would have done. Jessie wanted all her wits for the coming struggle.

"Did I frown?" she laughed. "If I did, it was certainly not at you. My thoughts——"

"Let me guess your thoughts," Mazaroff said in a low tone of voice. He reclined his elbows on the lip of the fountain so that his face was close to Jessie's. "I am rather good at that kind of thing. You are thinking that the queen did not care much for the pictures."

Jessie repressed a start. There was a distinct menace in the speaker's words. If they meant anything they meant danger, and that to the people whose interests it was Jessie's to guard. And she knew one thing that Vera Galloway could not possibly know—this man was a scoundrel.

"You are too subtle for me," she said. "What queen do you allude to?"

"There was only one queen in this conversation. I mean the Queen of Asturia. She left the salon

with you to look at certain pictures, and she was disappointed. Where is she ? "

" Back again in the salon by this time, doubtless," Jessie laughed. " I am not quite at home in the presence of royalty."

The brows of Mazaroff knitted into a frown. Evidently Jessie had accidentally said something that checkmated him for the moment.

" And the king ? " he asked. " Do you know anything about him ? Where is he, for example ? "

Jessie shook her head. She was treading on dangerous ground now, and it behoved her to be careful. The smallest possible word might lead to mischief.

" The queen is a great friend of mine," Mazaroff went on, and Jessie knew instantly that he was lying. " She is in danger, as you may possibly know. You shake your head, but you could tell a great deal if you choose. But then the niece of a diplomatist knows the value of silence."

" The niece of a diplomatist learns a great deal," Jessie said coldly.

" Exactly. I hope that I have not offended you. But certain things are public property. It is impossible for a crowned head to disguise his vices. That the King of Asturia is a hopeless drunkard and a gambler is known to everyone. He has exhausted his private credit, and his sullen subjects will not help him any more from the public funds. It is four years since the man came to the throne, and he has not been crowned yet. His weakness and rascalities are Russia's opportunity."

" As a good and patriotic Russian you should be glad of that," Jessie said.

" You are a very clever young lady," Mazaroff

smiled. "As a Russian, my country naturally comes first. But then I am exceedingly liberal in my political views, and that is why the Czar prefers that I should more or less live in Western Europe. In regard to the Asturian policy, I do not hold with the views of my imperial master at all. At the risk of being called a traitor I am going to help the queen. She is a great friend of yours also?"

"I would do anything in my power to help her," Jessie said guardedly.

The Russian's eyes gleamed. In a moment of excitement he laid his hand on Jessie's arm. The touch filled her with disgust, but she endured it.

"Then you never had a better opportunity than you have at the present moment," Mazaroff whispered. "I have private information which the queen must know at once. Believe me, I am actuated only by the purest of motives. The fact that I am practically an exile from my native land shows where my sympathies lie. I am sick to death of this Russian earth hunger. I know that in the end it will spell ruin and revolution and the breaking up of the State. I can save Asturia, too."

"Do I understand that you want to see the queen?" Jessie asked.

"That is it," was the eager response. "The queen and the king. I expected to find him elsewhere. I have been looking for him in one of the haunts he frequents. I know that Charles Maxwell was with him this morning. Did he give you any hint as to the true state of affairs?"

"I don't know who you mean?" Jessie said unguardedly. "The name is not familiar to me."

"Oh, this is absurd!" Mazaroff said with some show of anger in his voice. "Caution is one thing,

but to deny knowledge of Lord Merehaven's private and confidential secretary is another matter. Come, this is pique—a mere lovers' quarrel, or something of that kind."

Jessie recovered herself at once. If Mazaroff had not been so angry he could not have possibly overlooked so serious a slip on the part of his companion.

"It is very good of you to couple our names together like this," Jessie said coldly.

"But, my dear young lady, it is not I who do it," Mazaroff protested. "Everybody says so. You said nothing when Miss Maitland taxed you with it at the duke's on Friday night. Lady Merehaven shrugs her shoulders, and says that worse things might happen. If Maxwell were to come up at this moment——"

Jessie waived the suggestion aside haughtily. This information was exceedingly valuable, but at the same time it involved a possible new danger. If this Charles Maxwell did come up—but Jessie did not care to think of that. She half turned so that Mazaroff could not see the expression of her face; she wanted time to regain control over her features. As she looked towards the house she saw twice the quick flash of light in one of the bedroom windows.

It was the signal that the queen was ready to return to the salon again. Jessie's duty was plain. It was to hurry back to the bedroom and attend to the good pleasure of the queen. And yet she could not do it with the man by her side; she could think of no pretext to get rid of him. It was not as if he had been a friend. Mazaroff was an enemy of the heads of Asturia. Possibly he knew a great deal

more than he cared to say. There had been a distinct menace in his tone when he asked how the queen had enjoyed the pictures. As Jessie's brain flashed rapidly over the events of the evening, she recalled to mind the spectacle of the queen and the strange lady who dragged the body of the helpless man between them. What if that man were the King of Asturia! Why, Vera Galloway had said so!

Jessie felt certain of it—certain that for some reasons certain people were not to know that the King of Asturia was under Lord Merehaven's roof, and this fellow was trying to extract valuable information from her. As she glanced round once more the signal flashed out again. For all Jessie knew to the contrary, time might be as valuable as a crown of diamonds. But it was quite impossible to move so long as Mazaroff was there.

She looked round for some avenue of escape. The garden was deserted still, for the concert in the salon was not yet quite over. Even here the glorious voice of the prima donna floated clear as a silver bell. The singer was flinging aloft the stirring refrain of some patriotic melody.

"The Asturian national anthem," Mazaroff said softly. "Inspiring, isn't it?"

CHAPTER IV

THE WARNING LIGHT

JESSIE could feel rather than see that the signal was flashing out again. She looked about her for some assistance. In the distance a man came from the direction of the house. In the semi-darkness he paused to light a cigarette, and the reflection of the match shone on his face. Jessie started, and her face flushed. It seemed as if the stars were fighting for her to-night. She recognized the dark, irregular features behind the glow of the match. She had made up her mind what to do. Surely the queen would understand that there was cause for delay, that some unforeseen danger threatened.

The man with the cigarette strolled close by the fountain. He had his hands behind him, and appeared to be plunged in thought. He would have passed the fountain altogether without seeing the two standing there, only Jessie called to him to stop in a clear gay voice.

"Have you lost anything, Captain Hope?" she asked. "Won't you come and tell us what it is?"

Jessie's voice was perfectly steady, but her heart was beating to suffocation now. For Vera's cousin, Captain Ronald Hope, was perfectly well known to her in her own private capacity as Jessie Harcourt. Hope had been a frequent visitor at her father's house in the old days, and Jessie had had her dreams.

Had he not inspired Vera's daring scheme! Hope had not forgotten her, though she had elected to disappear and leave no sign, the girl knew full well; for had not Hope told Vera Galloway of the marvellous likeness between herself and Jessie Harcourt?

It was a critical moment. That Hope had cared for her Jessie well knew, though she sternly told her heart that it was not to be. Would he recognize her and penetrate her disguise? If the eyes of love are blind in some ways they make up for it in others. Jessie's heart seemed to stand still as Hope raised his crushed hat and came leisurely up the steps of the fountain.

"I was looking for my lost and wasted youth, Miss Galloway," he said. "How are you, Prince? What a night!"

"A night for lovers," Mazaroff said, though Jessie could see that he was terribly annoyed at the interruption of their conversation. "Reminds one of birds and nightingales and rose bowers. Positively, I think of the days when I used to send valentines and love tokens to my many sweethearts."

"And what does it remind you of, Captain Hope?" Jessie asked.

"*You* always remind me of my friend Jessie Harcourt," Hope said. "The more I see of you, the more I see the likeness."

"The little shop-girl in Bond Street," Mazaroff burst out. "I have met her. Ah, yes."

"We are waiting for Captain Hope to tell us what the evening reminds him of," Jessie said hurriedly.

"Certainly," Captain Hope said. "Afterwards I may want to ask Prince Mazaroff a question. This reminds me of a night three years ago—a night in

a lovely lane, with the moon rising at the end of it. Of course, there was a man and a woman in the lane, and they talked of the future. They picked some flowers, so as to be in tune with the picture. They picked dog roses——"

"'Your heart and mine' played out with the petals," Jessie laughed. "Do you know the other form of blowing the seed from a dandelion, only you use rose petals instead?"

There was a swift change on the face of Captain Hope. His face paled under the healthy tan as he looked quickly at Jessie. Their eyes met just for a moment—there was a flash of understanding between them. Mazaroff saw nothing, for he was lighting a cigar by the lip of the fountain. Jessie broke into some nonsense, only it was quite uncertain if she knew what she was saying. She appealed to Mazaroff, and as she did so she knocked the cigar that he had laid on the edge of the fountain so that it rolled down the steps on to the grass.

"How excessively clumsy of me!" Jessie cried. "Let me get it back for you, Prince Boris."

With a smile Prince Mazaroff proceeded to regain his cigar. Quick as a flash Ronald Hope turned to Jessie.

"What is it you want?" he asked. "What am I to do to help you? Only say the word."

"Get rid of that man," Jessie panted. "I can't explain now. Only get rid of that man and see that he is kept out of the way for at least ten minutes. Then you can return to me if you like."

Hope nodded. He appeared to have grasped the situation. With some commonplace on his lips he passed leisurely towards the house. Before Mazaroff could take up the broken threads of the

subject a young man, who might have been in the diplomatic service, came hurrying to the spot.

"I have been looking everywhere for you, Prince Boris," he said. "Lord Merehaven would like to say a few words to you. I am very sorry to detain you, but this is a matter of importance."

Mazaroff's teeth flashed in a grin which was not a grin of pleasure. He had no suspicion that this had been all arranged in the brief moment that he was looking for his cigar, the thing seemed genuine and spontaneous. With one word to the effect that he would be back again in a moment, he followed the secretary.

Jessie had a little time to breathe at last. She looked round her eagerly, but the signal was not given again. Ought she not to fly up the steps of the corridor? the girl asked herself. As she looked up again at the now darkened window the light came up for a moment, and the figure of a man, recognizable as that of General Maxgregor, stood out in high relief. The head of the figure was shaken twice, and the light vanished again. Jessie could make nothing of it except that she was not to hurry. Whilst she was still waiting and wondering what to do, Captain Ronald Hope returned. His face was stern, but at the same time there was a tender light in his eyes that told Jessie not to fear.

"What is the meaning of it all?" he asked. "I never had such a surprise in my life. When you spoke about our old sweetheart pastime of your heart and mine played with the petals of the wild rose, I recognized you for Jessie Harcourt at once, because we invented that game, and the understanding was that we were never to tell anybody

else. Oh, yes, I see that you are my dear little Jessie now."

The tender words thrilled Jessie. She spoke with an unsteady smile on her lips.

"But you did not recognize me till I gave you a clue," she said. "Are you very angry with me, Ronald?"

"I meant to be if ever I found you," Hope said. "I am going to be stern. I was going to ask you why you had——"

"Dear Ronald, you had no right to speak like that. Great friends as we used to be——"

"Oh, yes, I know what you are going to say. Great friends as we were, I had never told you that I loved you. But you knew it perfectly well, without any mere words of mine; your heart told you so. Though I have never kissed you—never so much as had my arm about your waist—we knew all the time. And I meant to wait till after my long stay in Ireland. Then your father died, and you were penniless, and you disappeared. My dearest girl, why did you not tell me?"

"Because you were poor, Ronald. Because I did not want to stand between you and your career. Ada and myself were as proud as we were penniless. And I thought that you would soon forget."

"Forget! Impossible to forget you, Jessie. I am not that kind of man. I came here frequently because I was trying to get a diplomatic appointment, through my friend General Maxgregor, in the Asturian service, where there is both trouble and danger and the chance of a future. And every time that I saw Vera Galloway my heart seemed to ache for the sight of you. I told her about you often. Now tell me, why did your pride break down

"A stifled cry came from Jessie's lips."

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so suddenly to-night? You might have passed for Vera had you not spoken about the roses."

"I had the most pressing need of your assistance," Jessie said hoarsely. "I did not want to disclose myself, but conscience called me imperatively. I dare say you are wondering why I am masquerading here as Miss Galloway, and where she is gone. I cannot tell you. She only found me out to-day, and implored me to come to her and take her place. My decision to do so was not free from sordid consideration. I have played my part with success till that scoundrel Mazaroff came along. At present I am in attendance on the Queen of Asturia, who is in one of the rooms overhead with General Maxgregor and a helpless paralytic creature who is no less than the King of Asturia. If you ask me about this mystery I cannot tell you. The whole thing was fixed up in a desperate hurry, and here I am. It was necessary to get Prince Mazaroff out of the way so that the queen could return without being seen. I should not be surprised to find that Mazaroff was no more than a vulgar Russian spy after all."

"I feel pretty well convinced of it," Hope said. "But how long is this to go on, Jessie?"

"Till Miss Galloway comes back dressed in the fashion of the Bond Street shop-girl. Then we shall change dresses, and I shall be free to depart."

Hope whispered something sweet, and the colour came to Jessie's cheeks. She was feeling resolute and brave enough now. As she turned and glanced at the upstairs window she saw the light spring up and the blind pulled aside. Then a man, stripped to his shirt and trousers, threw up the window and stood upon the parapet waving his arms wildly and gesticulating the while. A stifled cry came from

Jessie's lips. If the man fell to the ground he would fall on the stone terrace and be killed on the spot.

But he did not fall; somebody gripped him from behind, the window was shut, and the blind fell. There was darkness for a few seconds, and then the two flashes of the signal came once more, sharp and imperative.

CHAPTER V

DEEPER STILL

PUZZLED, vaguely alarmed, and nervous as she was, Jessie had been still more deeply thrilled could she have seen into the room from whence the signal came. She had escorted the Queen of Asturia there, and subsequently the man known as General Maxgregor, but why they came and why that secret meeting Jessie did not know.

In some vague way Jessie connected the mystery with the hapless creature whom she knew now to be the King of Asturia. Nor was she far wrong. In the dressing-room beyond the larger room where that strange interview was to take place, the hapless man lay on a bed. He might have been dead, so silent was he and so still his breathing. He lay there in his evening dress, but there was nothing about him to speak of his exalted rank. He wore no collar or star or any decoration; he might have been no more than a drunken waiter tossed contemptuously out of the way to lie in a sodden sleep till the effects of his potations passed.

The sleeper was small of size and mean of face, the weak lips hidden with a ragged red moustache; a thin crop of the same flame-coloured hair was on his head. In fine contrast stood the Queen of Asturia, regally beautiful, perfectly dressed and flashing with diamonds. There was every inch of a queen. But her face was bitter and hard, her dark eyes flashed.

"And to think that I am passing my life in peril, ruining my health and shattering my nerves for a creature like *hat*!" she whispered vehemently. "A cowardly, dishonest, drunken hog—a man who is prepared to sacrifice his crown for money to spend on wine and cards. Nay, the crown may be sold by this time for all I know."

The figure on the bed stirred just a little. With a look of intense loathing the queen bent down and laid her head on the sleeper's breast. It seemed to her that the heart was not moving.

"He must not die," she said passionately. "He must not die—yet. And yet, God help me, I should be the happier for his release. The weary struggle would be over, and I could sleep without the fear of his being murdered before my eyes. Oh, why does not Paul come!"

The words came as if in protest against the speaker's helplessness. Almost immediately there came a gentle tap at the door, and General Maxgregor entered. A low, fierce cry of delight came from the queen; she held out a pair of hands that trembled to the newcomer. There was a flush on her beautiful face now, a look of pleasure in the splendid eyes. She was more like a girl welcoming her lover than a queen awaiting the arrival of a servant.

"I began to be afraid, Paul," she said. "You are so very late, that I——"

Paul Maxgregor held the trembling hands in a strong grasp. There was something in his glance that caused the queen to lower her eyes and her face to flush hotly. It was not the first time that a soldier has aspired to share a throne. There was more than one tradition in the berserker Scotch family to bear out the truth of it. The Maxgregors

of Glen had helped to make European history before now, and Paul Maxgregor was not the softest of his race.

Generally he passed for an Asturian, for he spoke the language perfectly, having been in the service of that turbulent State for the last twenty odd years. There was always fighting in the Balkans, and the pay had attracted Paul Maxgregor in his earliest days. But though his loyalty had never been called in question, he was still a Briton to the backbone.

"I could not come before, Margaret," he said. "There were other matters. But why did you bring him here? Surely Lord Merehaven does not know that our beloved ruler——"

"He doesn't, Paul. But I had to be here and play my part. And there came news that the king was in some gambling house with a troupe of that archfiend's spies. The police helped me, and I dragged him out and I brought him here by way of the garden. Vera Galloway did the rest. I dared not leave that man behind me, I dared not trust a single servant I possess. So I smuggled the king here and I sent for you. He is very near to death to-night."

"Let him die!" Paul Maxgregor cried. "Let the carrion perish! Then you can seat yourself on the throne of Asturia, and I will see that you don't want for a following."

The queen looked up with a mournful smile on her face. There was one friend here whom she could trust, and she knew it well. Her hands were still held by those of Maxgregor.

"You are too impetuous, Paul," she said softly. "I know that you are devoted to me, that yo—you love me——"

"I love you with my whole heart and soul, sweetheart," Maxgregor whispered. "I have loved you since the day you came down from your father's castle in the hills to wed the drunken rascal who lies there heedless of his peril. The Maxgregors have ever been rash where their affections were concerned. And even before you became Erno's bride, I warned you what to expect. I would have taken you off then and there and married you, even though I had lost my career and all Europe would have talked of the scandal. But your mind was fixed upon saving Asturia from Russia, and you refused. Not because you did not love me——"

The queen smiled faintly. This handsome, impetuous, headstrong soldier spoke no more than the truth. And she was only a friendless, desperate woman after all.

"I must go on, Paul," she said. "My duty lies plainly before me. Suppose Erno . . . dies? He may die to-night. And if he does, what will happen? As sure as you and I stand at this moment here, Russia will produce some document purporting to be signed by the king. The forgery will be a clever one, but it will be a forgery all the same. It will be proved that Erno has sold his country, the money will be traced to him, and Russia will take possession of those Southern passes. This information comes from a sure hand. And if Russia can make out a case like this, Europe will not interfere. Spies everywhere will make out that I had a hand in the business, and all my work will be in vain. Think of it, Paul—put your own feelings aside for a moment. Erno must not die."

Maxgregor paced up and down the room with long, impatient strides. The pleading voice of the queen

had touched him. When he spoke again his tone was calmer.

"You are right," he said. "Your sense of duty and honour make me ashamed. Mind you, were the king to die I should be glad. I would take you out of the turmoil of all this, and you would be happy for the first time in your life. We are wasting valuable time. See here."

As Maxgregor spoke he took a white package from his pocket and tore off the paper. Two small bottles were disclosed. The general drew the cork from one of them.

"I got this from Dr. Salerno—I could not find Dr. Varney," he explained—"and is for our distinguished drunkard—he takes one. The other is to be administered drop by drop every ten minutes. Salerno told me that the next orgie like this was pretty sure to be fatal. He said he had made the remedy strong."

The smaller bottle was opened, and Maxgregor proceeded to raise the head of the sleeping figure. He tilted up the phial and poured the contents down the sleeper's throat. He coughed and gurgled, but he managed to swallow it down. Then there was a faint pulsation of the rigid limbs, the white, mean face took on a tinge as if the blood were flowing again. Presently a pair of bloodshot eyes were opened and looked dully round the room. The king sat up and shuddered.

"What have you given me?" he asked fretfully. "My mouth is on fire. Fetch me champagne, brandy, anything that tastes of drink. What are you staring at, fool? Don't you see him over there? He's got a knife in his hand—he's all dressed in red. He's after me!"

With a yell the unhappy man sprang from the bed and flew to the window. The spring blind shot up and the casement was forced back before Maxgregor could interfere. Another moment and the madman would have been smashed on the flagstones below. With something that sounded like an oath Maxgregor dashed forward only just in time. His strong hands reached the drink-soddened maniac back, the casement was shut down, but in the heat and excitement of the moment the blind remained up, so that it was just possible from the terrace at the end of the garden to see into the room.

But this Maxgregor had not time to notice. He had the ruler of Asturia back on the bed now, weak and helpless and almost collapsed after his outburst of violence. The delusion of the red figure with the knife had passed for a moment, and the king's eyes were closed. Yet his heart was beating now, and he bore something like the semblance of a man.

"And to think that on a wretch like that the fate of a kingdom hangs," Maxgregor said sadly. "You can leave him to me, Margaret, for the time being. Your absence will be noticed by Mazaroff and the rest. Give the signal. . . Why doesn't that girl come?"

But the signal was repeated twice with no sign of the sham Miss Galloway.

CHAPTER VI

THE PERIL SPEAKS

THE two conspirators exchanged uneasy glances. The king seemed to have dropped off again into a heavy sleep, for his chest was rising steadily. Evidently the powerful drug had done its work. Maxgregor had opened the second phial, and had already begun to drop the spots at intervals on the sleeping man's lips.

"There must be something wrong," the queen said anxiously. "I am sure Miss Galloway is quite to be relied upon. She knew that she had to wait. They—why does she not come?"

"Watched, probably," Maxgregor said between his teeth. "There are many spies about. This delay may cause serious trouble, but you must not return back by yourself. . . . Try again."

Once more the signal was tried, and after the lapse of an anxious moment a knock came at the door. The queen crossed rapidly and opened it. Jessie stood there a little flushed and out of breath.

"I could not come before," she explained. "A man found me by the fountain. I can hardly tell you why, but I am quite sure that he is your enemy. If you knew Prince Boris Mazaroff——"

"You did wisely," the queen said. "I know Mazaroff quite well, and certainly he is no friend of mine or of my adopted country. You did not let him see you come?"

"No; I had to wait till there was a chance to get rid of him, madame. A friend came to my assistance, and Lord Merehaven was impressed into the service. Mazaroff will not trouble us for some little time; he will not be free before you regain the salon. And this gentleman——"

"Will have to stay here. He has to look after the king. Lock the door, Paul."

Maxgregor locked the door behind the queen and Jessie. They made their way quickly into the garden again without being seen. It was well that no time was lost, for the concert in the salon was just over, and the guests were beginning to troop out into the open air. The night was so calm and warm that it was possible to sit outside. Already a small army of footmen were coming with refreshments. The queen slipped away and joined a small party of the diplomatic circle, but the warm pressure of her hand and the radiancy of her smile testified to her appreciation of Jessie's services.

The girl was feeling uneasy and nervous now. She was wondering what was going to happen next. She slipped away from the rest and sauntered down a side path that led to a garden grove. Her head was in a maze of confusion. She had practically eaten nothing all day; she was feeling the want of food now. She sat down on a rustic seat and laid her aching head back.

Presently two men passed her, one old and grey and distinguished-looking, whom she had no difficulty in recognizing as Lord Merehaven. Nor was Jessie in the least surprised to see that his companion was Prince Mazaroff. The two men were talking earnestly together.

"I assure you, my lord, I am speaking no more

than the truth," Mazaroff said eagerly. "The secret treaty between Russia and Asturia over those passes is ready for signature. It was handed to King Erno only to-day, and he promised to read it and return it signed in the morning."

"Provided that he is in a position to sign," Lord Merehaven said drily.

"Just so, my lord. Under that treaty Russia gets the Southern passes. Once that is a fact, the fate of Asturia is sealed. You can see that, of course?"

"Yes, I can see that, Prince. It is a question of absorbing Asturia. I would give a great deal for a few words now with the King of Asturia."

"I dare say," Mazaroff muttered. "So would I for that matter. But nobody knows where he is. He has a knack of mysteriously disappearing when on one of his orgies. The last time he was discovered in Paris in a drinking den, herding with some of the worst characters in Europe. At the present moment his suite are looking for him everywhere. You see, he has that treaty in his pocket——"

Lord Merehaven turned in his stride and muttered that he must see to something immediately. Mazaroff refrained from following, saying that he would smoke a cigarette in the seclusion of the garden. The light from a lantern fell on the face of the Russian, and Jessie could plainly see the evil triumph there.

"The seed has fallen on fruitful ground," Mazaroff laughed. "That pompous old ass will—— Igon! What is it?"

Another figure appeared out of the gloom and stood before Mazaroff. The new-comer might have been an actor from his shaven face and alert air. He was in evening dress, and wore a collar of some order.

"I followed you," the man addressed as Igon said. "What am I looking so annoyed about? Well, you will look quite as much annoyed, my friend, when you hear the news. We've lost the king."

Something like an oath rose to Mazaroff's lips. He glanced angrily at his companion.

"The thing is impossible," he said. "Why, I saw the king myself at four o'clock this afternoon in a state of hopeless intoxication. It was I who lured him from his hotel with the story of some wonderful dancing he was going to see, with a prospect of some gambling to follow. I spoke in glowing terms of the marvellous excellency of the champagne. I said he would have to be careful, as the police have their eyes on the place. Disguised as a waiter the king left his hotel and joined me. I saw him helplessly drunk, and I came away with instructions that the king was to be carefully watched, and that he was not to be allowed to leave. Don't stand there and tell me that my carefully planned coup of so many weeks has failed."

"I do tell you that, and the sooner you realize it the better," the other man said. "We put the king to bed and locked the door on the outside. Just before dusk the police raided the place——"

"By what right? It is a private house. Nothing has ever taken place there that the police object to. Of course, it was quite a fairy tale that I pitched to the King of Asturia."

"Well, there it is!" the other said gloomily. "The police raided the place. Possibly somebody put them up to it. That Maxgregor is a devil of a fellow who finds out everything. They found nothing, and went off professing to be satisfied. And when I unlocked the door to see that we hadn't gone too

far with the king, he had vanished. I only found them out a little time ago, and I came to you at once. Not being an invited guest, I did not run the risk of coming to the house, but I got over the garden wall from the stables beyond, and here I am. It's no use blaming me, Mazaroff; I could not have helped it—nobody could have helped it."

Mazaroff paced up and down the gravel walk anxiously. His gloomy brows were knitted into a frown. A little while later and his face cleared again.

"I begin to see my way," he said. "We have people here to deal with cleverer than I anticipated. There is no time to be lost, Igon. Come this way."

The two rascals disappeared, leaving Jessie more mystified than ever. Then she rose to her feet in her turn and made her way towards the house. At any rate, she had made a discovery worth knowing. It seemed to be her duty to tell the queen what she had discovered. But the queen seemed to have vanished, for Jessie could not find her in the grounds of the house. As she came out of the hall she saw Ronald Hope, who appeared to be looking for somebody.

"I wanted you," he said in an undertone. "An explanation is due to me. You were going to tell me everything. I have never come across a more maddening mystery than this, Jessie."

"Don't even whisper my name," the girl said. "I will tell you everything presently. Meanwhile, I shall be very glad if you will tell me where I can find the Queen of Asturia."

"She has gone," was the unexpected reply. "She was talking to Lady Merehaven when a messenger came with a big letter. The queen glanced at it

and ordered her carriage at once. She went quite suddenly. I hope there is nothing wrong, but from the expression of your face——"

"I hope my face is not as eloquent as all that," Jessie said. "What I have to say to the queen will keep, or the girl I am impersonating can carry the information. Let us go out into the garden, where we can talk freely. I am doing a bold thing, Ronald, and—— What is it?"

A footman was handing a letter for Jessie on a tray. The letter was addressed to Miss Galloway, and just for an instant Jessie hesitated. The letter might be quite private.

"Delivered by the young person from Bond Street, miss," the footman said. "The young person informed me that she hoped to come back with all that you required in an hour, miss. Meanwhile she seemed to be anxious for you to get this letter."

"What a complication it all is," Jessie said as she tore open the envelope and read the contents under the big electrics in the hall. "This is another mystery, Ronald. Read it."

Ronald Hope leaned over Jessie's shoulder and read as follows:—

"At all hazards go up to the bedroom where the king is, and warn the general he is watched. Implore him for Heaven's sake and his own to *pull down the blind!*"

CHAPTER VII

"UNEASY LIES THE HEAD"

JESSIE crushed the paper carelessly in the palm of her hand. Her impulse was, of course, to destroy the letter, seeing that the possession of it was not unattended with danger, but there was no chance at present. The thing would have to be burnt to make everything safe.

"How long since the note came?" she asked the footman with an assumption of displeasure. "Really, these tradespeople are most annoying."

The footman was understood to say that the note had only just arrived, that it had been left by the young person herself with an intimation that she would return presently. To all of this Jessie listened with a well-acted impatience.

"I suppose I shall have to put up with it," she said. "You know where to ask the girl if she comes. That will do. What were we talking about, Captain Hope?"

It was all admirably done, as Ronald Hope was fain to admit. But he did not like it, and he did not hesitate to say so. He wanted to know what it all meant. And he spoke as one who had every right to know.

"I can hardly tell you," Jessie said unsteadily. "Events are moving so fast to-night that they are getting on my nerves. Meanwhile, you seem to know General Maxgregor very well—you say that you are anxious to obtain a post in the Asturian service.

That means, of course, that you know something of the history of the country. The character of the king, for instance——"

"Bad," Hope said tersely, "very bad indeed. A drunkard, a *roué*, and a traitor. It is for the queen's sake that I turn to Asturia."

"I can quite understand that. Queen Margaret of Asturia seems very fortunate in her friends. Look at this. Then put it in your pocket, and take the first opportunity of destroying it."

And Jessie handed the mysterious note to Ronald, who read it again with a puzzled air.

"That came from Vera Galloway," the girl explained. "She is close by, but she does not seem to have finished her task yet. Why I am here playing her part I cannot say. But there it is. This letter alludes to General Maxgregor, who is upstairs in one of the rooms in close attendance on the King of Asturia, who is suffering from one of his alcoholic attacks. Do you think that it is possible for anybody to see into the room ?"

"Certainly," Ronald replied. "For instance, there are terraces at the end of the garden made to hide the mews at the back from overlooking the grounds. An unseen foe hidden there in the trees, with a good glass, may discover a good deal. Vere Galloway knows that, or she would not have sent you that note. You had better see to it at once."

Jessie hurried away, having first asked Hope to destroy the note. The door of the room containing the king was locked, and Jessie had to rap upon it more than once before it was opened. A voice inside demanded her business.

"I come with a message from the queen," she whispered. She was in a hurry, and there was

always the chance of the servants coming along. "Please let me in."

Very cautiously the door was opened. General Maxgregor stood there with a bottle in his hand. His face was deadly pale, and his hand shook as if he had a great fear of something. The fear was physical, or Jessie was greatly mistaken.

"What has happened?" she asked. "Tell me, what has frightened you so terribly?"

"Frightened!" Maxgregor stammered. It seemed odd at the moment to think of this man as one of the bravest and most dashing cavalry officers in Europe. "I don't understand what you mean?"

With just a gesture of scorn Jessie indicated the cheval glass opposite. As Maxgregor glanced at the polished mirror he saw a white, ghastly face, wet with sweat, and with a furtive, shrinking look in the eyes. He passed the back of his hand over his moist forehead.

"You are quite right," he said. "I had not known—I could not tell. And I have been passing through one of the fiercest temptations that ever lured a man to the edge of the Pit. You are brave and strong, Miss Galloway, and already you have given evidences of your devotion to the queen. Look there!"

With loathing and contempt Maxgregor indicated the bed on which the King of Asturia was lying. The pitiful, mean, low face and its frame of shock red hair did not appeal to Jessie.

"Not like one's recognized notion of royalty," she said.

"Royalty! The meanest beggar that haunts the gutter is a prince compared to him. He drinks, he gambles, he is preparing to barter his crown for a

mess of pottage. And the fellow's heart is hopelessly weak. At any moment he may die, and the heart of the queen will be broken. Not for him, but for the sake of her people. You see this bottle in my hand?"

"Yes," Jessie whispered. "It might be a poison and you—and you——"

"Might be a poisoner," Maxgregor laughed uneasily. "The reverse is the case. I have to administer the bottle drop by drop till it is exhausted, and if I fail the king dies. Miss Galloway, when you came into the room you were face to face with a murderer."

"You mean to say," Jessie stammered, "that you were going to refrain from—from——"

"That was it, though you hesitate to say the word. I had only to get rid of the contents of that bottle and let it be tacitly understood that the patient had taken his medicine. In an hour he would be dead—his heart would have given way under the strain. The world would have been well rid of a scoundrel, and I should never have been found out. The queen would have regained her freedom at the loss of Asturia. And I would have consoled her—I could have healed her wound."

The last words came with a fierce indrawing of the speaker's breath. One glance at his face, and Jessie knew everything. She could feel for the long-drawn agony of the strong man's temptation. She loved herself, and she could realize it all. There was nothing but pity in her heart.

"I understand," she said. "Oh, I understand perfectly. I came in time to save you. General Maxgregor, this matter must never be alluded to between us again. The temptation is past now, I am certain. A brave and good soldier like you—— But I am forgetting. I did not come to you from

"'What is it?' Jessie asked anxiously.

the queen as I said, because the queen has already departed. I had an urgent message from some unknown friend who desires me to say that you have left the blind up."

"Bless me! and is that really a fact?" Maxgregor exclaimed. "And it is quite possible for any one to see into this room from the terrace at the end of the garden. I used to play here as a boy. There are many spies about to-night. I am glad you reminded me."

Maxgregor crossed over to the window and laid his hand on the blind. As he stood there with the light behind him his figure was picked out clear and sharp. The blind came down with a rush, there was a little tinkle of glass, and the general staggered back with his hand to his shoulder. A moan of pain escaped him as he collapsed into a chair.

"What is it?" Jessie asked anxiously. "Pray tell me, what is the matter? That broken glass——"

"A bullet," Maxgregor whispered between his teeth, that were clenched in pain. "As I stood in the window somebody fired at me from the garden. It must have been a watcher hidden amongst the trees on the terrace. A little more to the left and my career had been ended."

The man had obtained a grip of himself now, but he was evidently suffering intense pain. A dark stain of red broke out on the left side of his coat.

"I have been hit in the shoulder," he said. "I have no doubt that it is little more than a flesh wound, but it is bleeding, and I feel faint. I once lay on the battlefield all night with such a wound, so that I can put up with it. Please leave me alone for a moment; do not think of me at all. It is just the time for the king to have another dose of those drops. There

is no help for it now, Miss Galloway. You must stay and give the king his medicine until it is all gone. Meanwhile, I can only sit here and suffer. For Heaven's sake never mind me."

Jessie took the bottle from the hand of the stricken man and walked to the bed. She marvelled at the steadiness of her own hand. The drops fell on the lips of the sleeping man, who was now breathing regularly. Half an hour passed, and then the bottle was empty.

"I have done my task," Jessie said. "What next? Shall I call Lord Merehaven——"

"Not for worlds," Maxgregor whispered fiercely. "He must not know. We must wait till the house is quiet. There is no occasion . . . how faint and giddy I am! If there was only one man whom I could trust at this critical moment!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE VERY MAN

JESSIE thought for a moment, then a brilliant inspiration came to her. She touched Maxgregor on the arm.

"I have the very man," she said. "You know him; he is a good and efficient soldier. Moreover, he is anxious to obtain a post in the Asturian army. He is a great friend of mine—Captain Ronald Hope."

"You are a veritable angel of mercy and courage," Maxgregor oried. "There is no man I would sooner trust in a crisis like this than Captain Hope. Will you take long to find him?"

Jessie engaged to have Ronald in the room in five minutes. She crept down the stairs as if listless and bored with everything, but her heart was beating thick and fast. There was no trouble in finding Ronald, who advanced towards the stairs at Jessie's signal. She wasted no words in idle explanation, but led him directly to the room where Maxgregor was waiting.

"We seem to have dropped into a murderous gang," he said, when the hurried explanation was finished. "Do you think those fellows know everything, General?"

"I fancy they know a great deal," Maxgregor muttered. "They know that they will be more safe if I am out of the way, and they have a pretty good notion of the identity of the poor fool lying on the bed yonder. If we could only get him away!

He had no business to come here at all, and yet the queen could not do anything else. If we could only get him away!"

"Wouldn't it come to the same thing if those murderous ruffians merely thought that the king had gone?" Jessie asked. "Then in the dead of the night I could manage the real removal. If I could show you a way of throwing dust in the eyes of those people——"

"You have a plan?" Maxgregor said. "A clever woman against the world! Say on."

"My plan is a very simple one," Jessie said. "Before long the grounds will be deserted for supper. There will be nobody in the garden at all. Supper is at midnight. Change clothes with the king, though it will be a tight fit for you, General. Then you can descend by the balcony to the garden. Go to the gate that leads into the lane beyond, walk as if you were under the influence of recent potations. At the end of the lane are cabs. Take one and go to your chambers and send for a doctor. Doubtless you will be followed in another cab by whoever was, or rather *is*, in the garden, but I will see that the murderer is delayed. Later on Captain Hope and myself will decide what is to be done with the king."

The plan was simple, but quite sufficient for the circumstances. Jessie retired into the dressing-room whilst the change was being made. She was not sorry for a little time to collect her thoughts. It seemed to her that she had lived for a century since the few hours before when Madame Malmaison had given her a curt dismissal. A lifetime had been crushed into minutes. The girl was being taxed now to the utmost limit of her strength. She longed for Vera Galloway's return.

Still, she had achieved her object; she was likely to be free from anxiety for some time to come, and best of all, she had found Ronald Hope again. It was good to know that he had loved her all along, and that he had not once faltered in his allegiance. It was worth a great deal to know that.

A whisper behind the door of the dressing-room, and Jessie was herself again. The change had been made, and the king had fallen into his stupor once more. General Maxgregor looked pinched and confined in the dress of his king, but that would pass in the dark. His face was deadly white too, which was all in his favour. The wound had ceased to bleed, but the pain was still there.

"I am quite ready," he whispered, "when you think that the coast is clear."

The house was growing noisy again as the guests filed in to supper. Jessie ventured into the corridor presently and looked out into the grounds. So far as she could see the place was empty. She would go and take her place by the door leading into the lane, and the general was to follow a little later. Would Ronald lend her half a sovereign? Jessie shuddered and turned a little pale as she pushed through the belt of trees behind the terrace, for the would-be murderer might have been lurking there at that moment.

From where she stood she could see Maxgregor coming in her direction. He walked unsteadily; there was no reason to sham intoxication, for his wound did that for him. It was only the iron nerve of the man that kept him going at all. Jessie was thankful at length to see that Maxgregor had reached the door. At the end of the lane two hansoms were standing. The general stumbled into one of them

and was driven rapidly away. Then, as Jessie had confidently anticipated, another figure emerged as if from the door of the garden and hailed the other hansom. Doubtless the idea was to keep the general's cab in sight and track him to his destination, under the impression that the King of Asturia was in the first hansom.

But Jessie was resolved to frustrate that. She stepped quickly forward and hailed the other cab. Then for the first time she saw that the newcomer was not, as she expected, a man, but a woman. She was tall and fair, and exceedingly good looking.

"I particularly want that cab," she said coolly. "I put up my hand first."

The speaker used good English, Jessie noticed, though with a lisp. Without waiting to combat the point, Jessie jumped into the cab.

"There is another a little way down the lane," she said. "I am in a hurry, or I would wait. Please drive me to 14, Albert Mansions, Hyde Park."

With a sort of smothered exclamation, the other hurried down the lane. The cabman again asked where he was to go. He had not caught the direction, he said.

"I don't want to go anywhere," Jessie said coolly, as she came to the ground again. "Take this half sovereign, and drive some distance, say a mile, at a good pace. And if you can possibly prevent that woman behind catching the first cab so much the better. Now bang your doors to and be off."

With a grin the cabman touched his cap, the door banged, and the hansom set off as if the fare were in a breakneck hurry. Standing well back in the doorway Jessie had the satisfaction of seeing the fair woman flash by her presently on her futile

errand. She had saved the situation for the present. Nobody guessed where the King of Asturia was, and the spy had gone off on a false errand altogether. No doubt the would-be assassin had departed by this time.

In a fever of impatience Ronald Hope awaited Jessie at the steps of the balcony. The gardens were quite deserted by this time, so that it was possible to talk in safety.

"He got clear off," Jessie said, not without a little pardonable pride. "As I expected, an attempt was made to follow him, only fortunately there were only two hansoms in the lane, and I took the second one and pretended to drive away whilst the spy was hurrying elsewhere in search of a conveyance. That was what I wanted your half sovereign for, Ronald."

"And the spy?" Ronald asked. "What sort of a fellow was he?"

"It was not a fellow at all. The spy was a woman, and a very nice looking one, too. Tall and fair, with rather a patrician cast of features. But I should know her again."

"And now you are going to tell me everything, dearest?" Ronald said.

"Indeed I am not going to do anything of the sort just at present," Jessie said. "I don't want anybody to see me talking to you in this fashion when everybody is at supper. Recollect that I am Miss Vera Galloway, and that I am supposed to be fond of a certain Charles Maxwell, whose friends may make mischief for him. I shall go into supper; and indeed, Ronald, a little food and a glass of wine are absolute necessities, for my legs are trembling as if I had walked too far. Have patience."

Ronald bent and kissed the speaker, with a fervent hope that everything would end well. Jessie slipped into the supper-room presently and took her seat at a table with three other people, who welcomed her heartily. She had not the least idea who they were, but they evidently knew Vera Galloway very well indeed. Some of the questions were very awkward ones for the girl to reply to.

"My dear friends," she said, "I am ravenously hungry. Positively, I have a country appetite. A little of the chicken and salad and just a glass of champagne. I am not going to answer any questions till I have had my supper. Go on with your gossip."

In spite of her anxiety Jessie made a hearty supper. She was glad presently when a footman came up to her with a message. She hoped that Vera Galloway, in the guise of a shop-girl, had come back. But it was not the real Vera, it was only an intimation to the effect that a district messenger boy was waiting to see Miss Vera Galloway in the hall. Hurriedly Jessie passed out.

"Charing Cross 'Ospital, miss," the lad said as he touched his cap. "Young person from a shop. Had a nasty accident; run over by a cab. Said as they was to let you know as how she could not come to-night and see to your hat as arranged."

Jessie checked a wild burst of hysterical laughter. She was in a pretty predicament indeed.

She was not even aware of Vera's maid's name. She would write a letter to Vera asking for definite instructions. The note was despatched at length, and Jessie came into the hall with a feeling of wonder as to what was going to happen next. She was glad to find Ronald Hope awaiting her.

"There are lines of anxiety on your face," he said. "I shall be very glad when the real Vera Galloway comes back and enables that 'young person' Jessie Harcourt to depart in peace. Let me know when the time comes, so that I can escort you back to your lodgings and talk matters over with you and Ada."

"There is not the slightest chance of your doing that to-night, Ronald," Jessie said, repressing a wild desire to laugh. "My dear boy, this thing is developing from one adventure to a hideous nightmare. Of course, I haven't the remotest idea what Miss Galloway had in her mind when she brought me here, but I have just heard that she has met with an accident which will detain her in Charing Cross Hospital till the end of the week."

"Which means that you must carry on the masquerade till then?"

"Which means that I must try, which is a very different thing altogether. I can only clear myself by confessing the truth, and thereby getting Miss Galloway into serious trouble. She is a good girl, and I am certain that she is up to no wrong. She is making a great sacrifice for the sake of somebody else. If I tell the truth, that sacrifice will be in vain. Ronald, tell me what I am to do for the best."

But Ronald Hope had no advice to offer. The situation was beyond the wildest dreams of fiction. He could only shrug his shoulders and hope for the best. There was nothing for it now but to sit down and watch the progress of events.

"Let us go and enjoy ourselves," Ronald said. "I feel horribly guilty over the whole thing, especially as Lady Merehaven is such a dear good friend of mine. Is that a band I can hear in the garden?

Let us walk about, and pretend that we are perfectly gay and happy."

Supper was over by this time, and the guests all over the house and grounds. Jessie thought of that white, silent form sleeping in the room where she had conducted the Queen of Asturia and General Maxgregor. A sudden thought had come to her.

"I can't do it, Ronald," she said. "Practically, I am left guardian of a king. I, who was only this morning quite content to try on bonnets in a Bond Street shop! It seems almost incredible, but the fact remains. If his majesty comes to his senses——"

"By Jove!" Ronald said thoughtfully. "I have never thought of that. What are you going to do?"

"Run upstairs again and see that the king is all right. Then there is another matter that has entirely escaped my attention in the new complication —General Maxgregor. He went away from here badly hurt and in great pain. He may have fainted in the cab—he may be dead, perhaps. Ronald, you must be guided by me. You have the run of the house—you seem to come and go as you like."

"I have had the run of the house since I was a kid in knickerbockers, Jessie."

"Very good. Then you are to go at once to the general's lodgings and see that everything is being done for him. Then come back and report progress. Go at once, please."

Ronald departed obediently. As Jessie crossed the room in the direction of the house, three girls stood in her way. She would have passed them for strangers, but they held on to her in a manner so familiar that Jessie realized they were friends of Vera Galloway's.

"What is the matter with the girl to-night?" one of them cried gaily. "There is a frown on her brow, there are lines on her cheeks. Is it Tommy or Larry that causes the trouble?"

Jessie laughed in affected good humour, wondering all the while who Tommy and Larry might be. The question was pressed again, and there was nothing but to answer it.

"Oh, they are all right," she said in an offhand way. "Haven't you seen them to-night?"

"To-night!" one of the girls cried. "When? On one of the tables after the sugar? Positively, I am jealous of your Larry. But he would not have done so well at Brighton if Lionel had been there."

"Possibly not," Jessie admitted. "As Tommy said to me——"

"Tommy said to you!" laughed another of the girls. "Oh, you people are absurd over your pets. Cats are all very well in their way, but whilst there are dogs and horses——"

Jessie felt an inclination to embrace the speaker who had quite innocently helped her out of the hole. It was quite evident that Tommy and Larry were two pet cats belonging to Miss Galloway. The Lionel in question, whose absence from Brighton—presumedly at a show—was evidently a pet of the tall girl with the very nice blue eyes. The incident was farcical enough, but the incidents came so fast that they were beginning to get on Jessie's nerves.

"I'll come and see Lionel soon, if I may," she said. "Is that Lady Longmarsh over there? I have been looking for her all the evening."

And Jessie managed to slip away into the house. Here and there someone or another smiled at her and asked her questions that she found it difficult to

parry, chaff and badinage that would have been easy to Vera Galloway, though they were as Greek to her double.

"I can positively feel my hair turning grey," Jessie said to herself as she crept up the stairs. The thought of carrying on this imposition till the end of the week was appalling. "I shall have to invent a bad turn of neuralgia, and stay in my bedroom till Saturday. Vera is a society girl, and surely has many social engagements, and I don't even know what her programme for to-morrow is."

Jessie slipped into the room where the king lay. He looked grotesque enough in Maxgregor's uniform, and not in the least like a ruler. So far as Jessie could see, the poor creature looked like sleeping a long time yet. The danger of collapse was past for the present, but the deep sleep of utter intoxication still clung to the ruler of Asturia. For some time, at any rate, there was no expectation of danger in that quarter. And there was always Ronald Hope to fall back upon. When everybody had gone, which was not likely to be very soon, the king would be smuggled out of the house. The Queen of Asturia had gone off in a hurry, but she was pretty certain to send instructions by somebody. The man on the bed turned and muttered something in his sleep.

"Don't let anybody know," he said. "He's at Charleston Street, No 15. Always manage it that way. Give me some more of it. Out of the other bottle."

The voice trailed off in a murmur, and the deep sleep fell again. Jessie crept away and locked the door. Down in the hall a great throng of guests passed from the room into the garden and back again. At the back of the press Jessie caught sight

of a tall, stately figure, with the light falling on her glorious hair and sparkling on her diamond tiara. Jessie's heart gave a great leap; she felt that the needed aid was close at hand.

"Heaven be praised!" she said. "The queen has returned again. What does she know, I wonder?"

CHAPTER IX

"PONGO"

THE Queen of Asturia was back again surely enough, smiling as if she had not a trouble in the world. Lady Merehaven was listening to what she had to say.

"I found that I had to return," she was murmuring. "I am searching for a will-o'-the-wisp. I was told that I should find him at the Duchess of Norton's, but he had been called away from there. There was a case needing his urgent attention at Charing Cross Hospital. I was told that subsequent to that matter my will-o'-the-wisp was coming on here positively. Have you seen Dr. Varney?"

Lady Merehaven had not seen the distinguished physician, but he had certainly promised to look in at Merehaven House in the course of the evening. Despite his position and his many affairs, Dr. Varney was a man who prided himself upon keeping his social engagements, and he was certain to appear. It seemed to Jessie that the queen seemed to be relieved about something. She had never ceased to smile, but there was an expression of sudden fierce gladness in her eyes. As she looked up her glance took in Jessie. There was a quick signal, the uplifting of a bouquet, and that was all.

But Jessie understood that the queen wanted to speak to her without delay. The opportunity came presently, for Lady Merehaven was called away, leaving a pompous old diplomat to wait on the

queen. It was an easy matter to send him in quest of lemonade, and then as the bouquet was lifted again, Jessie crossed over rapidly to the side of the queen.

" Tell me all that has happened," she commanded swiftly, fiercely almost, though the smile never left her face. She might have been discussing the most trivial of topics. " I was called away; I had to go. I am at the beck and call of people like a footman."

" You have not seen or heard anything, madame? " Jessie asked.

" Did I not tell you so? Forgive my temper, but I am harassed and worried to death. Is everything going all right? "

" Up to the present, madame," Jessie proceeded to explain. " It was unfortunate that the blind in the room upstairs was not pulled down. I had a warning about that, so I proceeded to the bedroom. General Maxgregor was giving those drops to the king, out of the little bottle——"

" Yes, yes. And were they all administered? Heaven forgive me for asking the question, but I think that had I been in General Maxgregor's place, I——but I talk nonsense. Were they all——? "

" Every one of them. I administered the last few drops myself. I had to, for the simple reason that General Maxgregor was wounded. The blind was up, and somebody shot at the general from the garden, from the high terrace at the end of the garden."

" Ah! Well, it is only what I expected, after all. The general—was he badly hit? "

" In the shoulder. He said it was only a flesh wound, but evidently he was in great pain. You see, after that the general had to go away at once. At my suggestion he changed clothes with the king,

and I managed to get him away, all staggering and ill as he was, by way of the garden."

"You are a brave and true friend—God bless you! But there was the danger of being followed, Vera."

"I thought of that. There were two hansoms in the lane, and I put the supposed king into one of them and gave the cabman the address of the general's lodgings. As I expected, somebody appeared and attempted to obtain the use of the other cab, but I was too quick for the foe. I gave the cabman money and told him to drive on as if he carried a fare, and the spy was baffled."

"Wonderful! I shall never forget your service to me and to Asturia. What was the man like who——"

"It was not a man at all, madame," Jessie proceeded to explain. "It was a woman. She was tall and fair, and exceedingly beautiful. I should not have any difficulty in recognizing her again."

The queen expressed her satisfaction, nor did she seem in the least surprised to find that the spy was a woman.

"I am very sorry about the accident to the general," she said thoughtfully. "But it only tends to show you what we have to guard against. I must go to the general as soon as possible. He may be very ill."

"I have already sent," Jessie said. "To a great extent I had to confide in somebody. I told my friend Captain Ronald Hope all that was necessary, and he is on his way to the general's now. Captain Hope is also a great friend of General Maxgregor, and is, I know, very anxious to find a post in the Asturian army. Perhaps your majesty may know him?"

The queen smiled and nodded. Evidently the name of Ronald was quite familiar to her. Then she went on to ask after the health of the king. Her face changed to a bitter smile as Jessie proceeded to say what she had done in that direction.

" I shall know how to act in the future," the queen said, " once the crisis is over. But there are people waiting to talk to me, and who are wondering why I am wasting my time on a mere girl like you when I have the privilege of their society. If they only knew ! "

Jessie passed on, feeling that she was dismissed for the present. She wandered aimlessly into the garden ; there was a good deal of noise and laughter going on behind the terrace. The little door leading to the lane was open, and from the far side came the hiss of a motor.

" Have you come to join the fun, Vera ? " a girl who was a total stranger to Jessie asked. " We are having larks on Pongo's motor-car. But now that you have come Pongo will have eyes for nobody else."

Jessie wondered who Pongo was, and whether any tender passages had passed between him and Miss Galloway. Possibly not, for Vera was not the class of girl who made herself a familiar footing with the type of young man who allows himself to be christened by so characteristic a name.

" Doin' it for a charity," a typical Johnny drawled as the car pulled up. Jessie recognized the Bond Street type of rich fool who is flattered for his money. " Get in, Miss Vera. Take you as far as Piccadilly and back for a shilling. Society for Lost Dogs, you know."

Jessie promptly accepted the offer, for a wild,

brilliant scheme had come into her head. The motor flashed along before there was time for anybody else to get in.

"Not as far as Piccadilly," Jessie said. "Only to the end of the lane and back. I can't stay at present, Pongo. But if I come back presently, do you think you could get rid of the others and take me as far as Charing Cross Hospital? It's for the sake of a bet, you know."

Pongo, whose other name Jessie had not the slightest idea of, grinned with pleasure. The more ridiculous the thing, the more it appealed to his peculiar nature. He would keep his car at the end of the lane and wait for Miss Galloway an hour if necessary. The mention of his pet name and the flash from Jessie's eyes had utterly overcome him.

"Anything you like," he said. "Streets quiet, and all that; take you to Charing Cross and back before you could say Jack Robinson, don't you know. Only I'd like to make the journey slow, don't you know."

Jessie laughed a response to the meaningless chatter of her companion. She was going to do a foolish and most certainly a desperate thing, but there was no help for it. Back in the house again she could see a little man with a fine head and a grey beard talking to the queen. There was no need to tell Jessie that this was Doctor Varney, for she knew the great physician well by sight. She was going to speak to him presently and get an order, late as it was, for her to see a patient in the hospital. She knew quite well that it was no use her trying to get into the big establishment at that hour without a special permit, and it would be no fault of hers if that permit did not emanate from Dr. Varney.

The little man's powerful voice boomed out, but ever and again it was dropped at some quiet question from the queen. Presently the doctor moved on in the direction of Jessie. She assumed that he would probably know Miss Vera Galloway quite well, and she made up her mind to address him as a friend of the family. But there were other people first who claimed the doctor's attention—a Cabinet Minister, who had a question or two to put on the score of his personal health, so that it was some little time before Jessie obtained her chance. Even then the appearance of Lady Merehaven delayed the operation.

" Positively, my dear lady, I must apologize for being so late," the doctor said. " But there was a little matter claiming my attention at Charing Cross Hospital, an operation that one does not get every day, and one that would brook no delay. But I got here as soon as possible. Sad thing about your niece."

" Why, what is the matter with my niece ? " Lady Merehaven demanded. " My niece ! "

The doctor looked as surprised as his hostess. There was a grave expression on his fine face.

" Miss Vera Galloway," he said. " Managed to get run over by a cab. But you must know all about that. Nothing serious, really ; but the loss of her pleasant face here, and the knowledge that she takes no part in the festivities of the evening, is rather distressing. But she seems quite cheerful."

" Dr. Varney," Lady Merehaven cried, " positively, I know nothing of what you are talking about."

Jessie crept away and hid herself discreetly behind one of the big palms in the hall. What was coming now ?

CHAPTER X

A FRIEND AT COURT

JESSIE'S prevailing feeling was not one of fear; rather was she moved by an intense, overpowering curiosity. She lingered behind the palm wondering what was going to happen next. She could see between the graceful hanging leaves the puzzled expression on Lady Merehaven's face.

"But, my dear doctor, what you say is absurd," she was saying. "I saw Vera pass not five minutes ago. And if she had met with an accident and been conveyed to Charing Cross Hospital, why—— But the thing is out of the question."

"And yet I feel perfectly certain of my facts," Dr. Varney persisted. "It is true that I was in a hurry, and that the young lady I allude to was fast asleep—at any rate, nearly asleep. My dear lady, seeing that I was present at Vera's birth, and that all these years I have known her so intimately——"

Jessie came leisurely into sight. It was impossible to let this matter go any further. By chance the doctor had learnt something, and his mouth must be closed if possible. She came along with a smile and a hand outstretched.

"You are very late, doctor," she said. "I have been looking forward to a chat with you."

For once in his life Dr. Varney was genuinely astonished. He looked at Jessie in a vague, dreamy kind of way, though fortunately Lady Merehaven did not glance up and notice his face.

"There, you unbelieving man!" she cried. "Vera does not look as if she had met with anything serious in the way of an accident."

Dr. Varney pulled himself together promptly and took Jessie's outstretched hand. There was a twinkle in his shrewd eyes as he held the girl's fingers.

"Extraordinary mistake of mine, wasn't it?" he said. "Could have sworn that I saw you lying half asleep in one of the wards of Charing Cross Hospital. Case of shock and injured ankle. People said the patient called herself Harcourt, but could not recollect her address. Young girls have such queer escapades nowadays that——"

"But surely you know me better than that?" Jessie forced herself to say.

"I'm not quite so sure that I do," Varney chuckled. "However, the girl was very like you. Come and give me a sandwich and a glass of claret, and we'll talk of old times."

Jessie expressed herself as delighted, but inwardly she was praying for some diversion. She was quite convinced that the doctor was by no means satisfied; she could see that he was a shrewd, clever man of the world, and that he meant to question her adroitly. If once the conversation drifted to old times, she felt that she must be discovered.

But Varney ate his sandwich and sipped his claret and water with no reference to the past. He looked at Jessie once or twice in an abstracted kind of way. She felt that she must talk, that she must say something to start a safe conversation.

"What are you thinking about, doctor?" she asked.

"I am thinking," was the startling reply, "that

you are one of the finest actresses I have ever seen. The stage is the poorer for your absence."

Jessie's heart sank within her; there was no mistaking the dry significance of the speech. This man was sure of his ground; he had found her out. And yet there was a kindly look on his face, not as if he were dealing with an impostor at all.

"What do you mean?" Jessie asked. "I do not in the least understand you."

"Oh yes, you do; you understand me perfectly well. I don't know who you are, but I most assuredly know who you are *not*, and that is Vera Galloway. Mind, I am not accusing you of being a type of the mere vulgar impostor. I would trust you against the world."

"It is very good of you to say so," Jessie gasped. "You are not going to assume that—that——"

"That you are here for any evil purpose? With a face like yours the idea is impossible. As I was passing through the wards of the hospital just now, to my surprise I saw Vera Galloway there. I knew her not only by her face and figure, but by the dimples round her wrists. Now your wrists are very long and slender, and you have no dimples at all. Many men would have let out the whole thing, but not so me. I find that the patient has given the name of Harcourt, and that she has forgotten her address. Forgive me if I scented a scandal. That is why I led up so carefully to Lady Merehaven. But when you came on the scene I guessed exactly what had happened. You were engaged to play Vera's part when she was up to something elsewhere. I confess I am not altogether without sorrow that so charming a girl——"

"Indeed, I am quite sure that there was nothing

really wrong," Jessie cried. "From what I have seen of Miss Galloway I am quite sure that she is not that class of girl. But for this unfortunate accident. . . . Dr. Varney, you will not betray me?"

"Well, I won't," Varney cried, "though I am no doubt an old fool for my pains. It's very lucky that a clear head like mine has been imported into the business. Now, in the first place, tell me who you are and what you are doing here. I know you will be candid."

"I will tell you everything," Jessie said. She was utterly thankful that the case was no worse. "My name is Jessie Harcourt, and up to a few hours ago I was a shop-girl in Bond Street."

"That sounds quite romantic. A shop-girl in Bond Street and a lady by birth and breeding, too. Which branch of the family do you belong to?"

"The Kent Harcourts. My father was Colonel Harcourt, of the Royal Galways."

"Really now!" Varney exclaimed. "I knew your father quite well years ago. I was an army doctor myself for a long time. Your father was an extravagant man, my dear—always was. And he left you poor?"

"He left my sister and myself penniless. We were fit for nothing either. And that is why I found my way into a Bond Street shop. I was discharged because I was supposed to have flirted with the son of a customer. My indignant protest that the cowardly cad tried to kiss me counted for nothing. As the complaining customer was the Princess Mazaroff——"

"And her son the culprit," Varney said, with a queer gleam in his eyes. "My dear child, you have

done well to confide in me. But go on, tell me everything."

Jessie proceeded to relate her story at length, from the time that she met Vera Galloway down to the existing moment. And the romantic side of the royal story was not suppressed. Nor could Jessie feel that she had not an interested listener.

"This is one of the most remarkable stories that I have ever heard," Varney said. "And as a doctor in a large way of practice, I have heard some singular ones. I fancy that I can see my way clear now. And I know what you don't know—that Vera is taking a desperate step for the sake of a man she loves. It is quite plain to me why you are here. Well, well! I am doing quite wrong, but I am going to keep your secret."

"That is indeed good of you," Jessie said gratefully. "But there is more to be done. My dear doctor, I can see my way to important information without which it is impossible for me to sustain my present rôle until Miss Galloway comes home again. It is imperative that I should have a few words with her. You can give me a permit for the hospital authorities. After that the rest is easy."

"I quite see your point," Varney said thoughtfully. "You are as clever as you are courageous. But how are you going to manage this without being missed?"

"I am going to make use of another," Jessie laughed. All her courage had come back to her now. "I am going to make use of a gentleman known as Pongo. He is supposed to be very fond of me as Vera Galloway. He does not seem to be a very harmful individual."

"Honourable George Lascelles," Varney muttered.

"There is a good deal of good in Pongo, though he assumes the rôle of an ass in society. Once he marries and settles down he will be quite different. But how do you propose to enlist him in the service?"

Jessie proceeded to explain the silly business of the motor-car in the lane behind the house.

"I shall get him to take me to Charing Cross Hospital," she said. "You may be quite certain that Vera Galloway is not asleep. A few minutes with her will be quite enough for my purpose. And I shall be back again before I am missed. Do you approve?"

"I have to whether I like it or not," Varney grumbled, "though this is a nice predicament for a man in my position and my time of life. I'll go as far as the library and scribble out that permit, though what the College of Physicians would say if they only knew——"

And Varney strode off muttering as he went. But the twinkle was in his eyes still.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE GARDEN

JESSIE slipped out into the garden and along to the back of the terrace. The absurd nonsense of the motor-car was still going on in the lane. It was late now, and no chance of a crowd gathering there. The Honourable George clamoured for Jessie's company, and asked where she had been. But she smilingly shook her head, and declared that she was not ready; and, besides, there were many before her.

"I shall be back again practically in a quarter of an hour," she said. "I can't stir till then."

So far everything promised well. Jessie hurried back to the place where she had left Varney. He was waiting there with half a sheet of note paper in his hand.

"There is the permit," he said. You have only to show it to anybody in authority and there will be no more difficulty. Hullo! what is all this about?"

There was a disturbance in the hall—the figure of a French maid talking volubly in two languages at once; behind her a footman, accompanied by a man who was unmistakably a plain-clothes detective, and behind him the figure of a policeman, his helmet towering above the heads of the guests.

"Somebody asking for the Countess Saens," a guest replied to a question of Varney's. "As far as I can gather, there has been a burglary at the

house of the countess, and her maid seems to know something about it. But we shall know presently. Here comes the countess."

The Countess Saens came smilingly into the hall, a strikingly handsome figure in yellow satin. Jessie did not fail to notice her dark, piercing eyes.

"Who is she?" she asked Varney in a whisper. "Did you ever see such black eyes?"

"Don't know," the doctor replied. "Sort of comet of a season. Mysterious antecedents, and all that, but possesses plenty of money, gives the most splendid entertainments, and goes everywhere. I understand that she is the morganatic wife of one of the Russian grand dukes."

At any rate, the woman looked a lady to her finger tips, as Jessie was bound to admit. She came with an easy smile into the little group, and immediately her magnetic presence seemed to rivet all attention. The frightened maid ceased to scold in her polyglot way and grew coherent.

"Now let us get to the bottom of this business," the countess said gaily. "There has been a burglary at my house. Where did it take place, and what has been removed from the premises?"

"It was in your room, madame," the maid said—"in your dressing-room. I was going up to put everything right for the night and I saw the thief there."

"Would you recognize him again, Annette?" the countess asked.

"Pardon me, but it was not a man; it was a woman. And she had opened the drawers of your dressing table—she had papers in her hands. I came upon her suddenly, and she heard me. Then she caught me by the throat and half strangled me. Before I could recover my senses she had fled down

the stairs and out of the house. The hall porter took her for a friend of yours, and did not stop her. Then I suppose that my feelings overcame me, and——"

"And you went off in hysterics," the countess said with a contemptuous smile. "So long as you did not lose the papers——"

"But, madame, the papers are gone! The second drawer on the left-hand side is empty."

Jessie saw the dark eyes blaze and the stern face of the countess stiffen with fury. It was only for a moment, and then the face smiled once more. But that flashing insight was a revelation to Jessie.

"I hope you will be able to recognize the woman again," the countess said. "Shall you? Speak, you idiot!"

For the maid's gaze had suddenly become riveted on Jessie. The sight of her face seemed to fascinate the little Frenchwoman. It was some minutes before she found words to express her thoughts.

"But behind," she said, pointing a forefinger at Jessie as if she had been some striking picture. "Behind, she is there. Not dressed like that, but in plain black; but she stole those papers. I can feel the touch of her fingers on my throat at this moment. There is the culprit, *voilà!*"

"Oh, this is ridiculous!" the countess cried. "How long since this has happened?"

"It is but twenty minutes ago," Annette said. "Not more than half an hour, and behold the thief——"

"Behold the congenital idiot," the countess laughed. "Miss Galloway has not been out of my sight save for a few minutes for the last hour. Let the police find out what they can, and take that poor creature home and put ice on her head. . . .

Perhaps I had better go along. It is a perfect nuisance, but those papers were important. Will one of you call my carriage?"

The countess departed presently, smiling gaily. But Jessie had not forgotten that flashing eye and the expression on her features. She turned eagerly to Varney.

"Very strange, is it not?" she asked. "Can you see what it all means?"

"I can see perfectly well," Varney said coldly. "And I more or less hold the key to the situation. Let us assume for the moment that the countess is a spy and an intriguer. She has certain documents that somebody else badly wants. Somebody else succeeds in getting those papers by force."

"But why did the maid, Annette, pitch upon me?" Jessie asked.

"Because you were the image of the thief," Varney whispered. "Only she was dressed in black. The maid was not dreaming; she had more wits about her than we imagine. Unless I am greatly mistaken, the thief who stole those papers was no one else than Vera Galloway."

The logic was so forcible and striking that Jessie could only stand silent before it. The French maid had given Varney an important clue, though the others had been blind to it. And Vera had not disguised at the beginning of the adventure that she was engaged upon a desperate errand for the sake of the man she loved, or, at any rate, for one who was very dear to her. It had been a bold and daring thing to do, and Jessie's admiration was moved. She hoped from the bottom of her heart that Vera had the papers.

"You will know before very long," Varney said, as

if reading her thoughts, "whether Vera Galloway has been successful or not. There is no question whatever in my mind that Vera was the culprit. I will give you a hint as to why she has acted in this way presently. Get a thick black wrap of some kind and conceal it as closely as possible. When you are going through the streets of London you must have something over your head."

"If I only knew where to put my hand on a wrap of that description!" Jessie said helplessly.

"Time is short, and bold measures are necessary," Varney said coolly. "There are heaps of wraps in the vestibule, and I should take the first that came to hand. If the owner wants it in the meantime it will be assumed that it has been taken by mistake."

Jessie hesitated no longer. She chose a thick black cloak and hood arrangement that folded into very little space, and then she squeezed it under her arm. Then she strolled out into the garden. It was very still and warm. London was growing quiet, so that the shreiks of the late newsboys with the evening scare could be distinctly heard there. Varney laid his hand on Jessie's arm. He had grown very grave and impressive. The yelling newsboys were growing gradually nearer.

"Listen, and tell me what they are saying," Varney whispered.

Impressed by the sudden gravity of her companion's manner, Jessie gave all her ears to the call.

"Late Special! Startling case at the War Office! Suicide of Captain Lancing, and flight of Mr. Charles Maxwell! Disappearance of official documents! Special!"

"I hear," Jessie said; "but I am afraid that I don't understand quite."

"Well, there has been a scandal at the War Office. One or two officials there have been accused of selling information to foreign Governments. I heard rumours especially with regard to Asturian affairs. Late to-night Captain Lancing shot himself in the smoking-room of his club. They took him to Charing Cross, and as I happened to look into the club a little later I followed on to the hospital to see what I could do. But I was too late, for the poor fellow was dead. Now do you see how it was that I came to see Vera Galloway?"

Jessie nodded; she did not quite understand the problem yet. What had this War Office business to do with Vera Galloway and her dangerous and desperate enterprise? She looked inquiringly at her companion.

"We had better get along," he said. "I see Pongo is waiting for you. Tuck that wrap a little closer under your arm so that it may not be seen. And as soon as you get back come to me and let me know exactly what has happened. I ought to be ashamed of myself. I ought to lay all the facts of this case before my charming hostess; but there are events here beyond the usual society tenets. My dear child, don't you know who the Charles Maxwell is whose name those boys are yelling? Does not the name seem familiar to you? Come, you are quick as a rule."

"Oh, yes," Jessie gasped. "That was the name that Prince Mazaroff mentioned. Dr. Varney, it is the man to whom Vera Galloway is engaged, or practically engaged. What a dreadful business altogether."

"Yes," Varney said curtly," the plot is thickening. Now for the motor-car."

CHAPTER XII

A PRODIGAL SON

LOTH as he might have been inclined to admit it, Dr. Varney was by no means ill-pleased with his share of the adventure. He felt that a man like himself, who knew everything, would be decidedly useful. And how much he really did know Jessie would have been startled to know. For here was a man who had a great practice amongst politicians, and statesmen especially. He walked quietly back to the house now and entered the salon as if looking for somebody. His shrewd face was grave and thoughtful. He found his man at last—a tall, grizzled man, who bore some kind of likeness to a greyhound. He was in a measure a greyhound, for he had been a queen's messenger for many years.

"I thought I should find you about somewhere," the doctor said. "I want a few words with you, Lechmere. Let us go into the garden and smoke a cigarette."

"Always delighted to chat with you, Varney," Lechmere said. "Come along. Now, what is it?"

"*Re* the Countess Saens," Varney said. "You know the woman I mean?"

"Certainly I do. Lives in a big house in Connaught Crescent. Not her own house, by the way. Dresses magnificently, gives wonderful parties, and always has the last new thing. Handsome woman, too, and goes everywhere. But nobody knows anything about her."

"I came to you for a little information on the point, Lechmere."

"Well, as a matter of fact I can give it to you, Varney. There are very few of the foreign colony in London whose history I haven't ready for docketing. Many a useful hint have I given the Foreign Office and Scotland Yard. Ever hear of Saul Marx, the famous cosmopolitan spy—I mean the man who saved that war between France and Germany?"

"Of course I have heard of Marx. Who hasn't? But what has that to do with the business?"

"Well, he told me all about the charming countess. She began life in Warsaw in a company of strolling players. Afterwards she married one of the most noted scamps in Paris, who wanted a pretty wife as a pawn in some game of his. The fellow ill-treated her horribly, but he taught her everything in the way of the predatory life that was to be learnt. Finally, the husband died under very strange circumstances, and between ourselves, Marx says that the woman murdered him. After that she narrowly escaped a long term of imprisonment over the Malcolm-Sin diamond business, and then for a long time nothing was heard of her till she turned up as Vera Olpheut, the famous anarchist speaker. She was expelled from Russia, which was all a blind, seeing that she is one of the cleverest spies that the Russian police ever employed. Her ladyship is after a very big game now, or she would not be spending all that money. An adventuress like that never pays her tradesmen as a rule, but I know for a fact that the household bills are discharged regularly every week."

"You are quite sure of those facts?" Varney asked.

"My dear fellow, you can take them as gospel. Marx never makes a mistake. Why do you ask?"

"I am merely a seeker after information. I may be in the way of putting a spoke in the lady's wheel a little later on, perhaps. Have you heard of that business at the Foreign Office?"

"I heard of it just now; in fact, I looked in here to see if Merehaven could tell me anything about it. How those newspapers get hold of these things puzzles me. But I don't suppose it is true that poor old Dick Lancing committed suicide at his club, and——"

"It's perfectly true, Lechmere. I was in the club directly after, and I followed on to Charing Cross Hospital, only to find that I was too late. What you say about the newspapers is absolutely correct. But, unless I am greatly mistaken, the newspaper containing the startling report in question will help me over this matter. I am going to make a proposal to Lord Merehaven."

"I've been trying to get at him. But the Austrian Ambassador has held him fast for the last hour."

"Well, there is plenty of time," Varney went on. "From what I can understand papers of the utmost importance have been stolen from the Foreign Office, or they have been sold by some official to the foe. On the face of it, the charge points to poor Lancing; but one never can tell. Those papers relate to a kind of understanding with Asturia, and if Russia gets to know all about it then we are done. Now, let me tell you a little thing that happened to-night. There was a burglary at Countess Saens' house, and the thief took nothing but papers. The thief was a woman, who obviously

went to the countess' for the very purpose of obtaining possession of those papers. Now, it is only a theory of mine, but I feel pretty sure that the papers have to do with the Foreign Office scandal. If we get to the bottom of it, we shall find that the countess inspired the paragraph that the *Evening Mercury* had to-night. Do you happen to know anything about the editor of that sheet ? "

" Fellow named Hunt, an American," Lechmere replied. " As a matter of fact, the *Mercury* is an American paper, the first start of an attempt to capture the English Press. You know how those fellows boast. I've met Hunt several times in society."

" Did you ever happen to meet him at Countess Saens' house ? " Varney asked.

Lechmere turned over the question before he replied. On consideration he had seen Hunt twice at the house in question. Not that that was very material, because all sorts and conditions of men flocked to the countess' evening parties. But Varney thought otherwise.

" At any rate, the fact fits in well with my theory," he said. " I shall be greatly surprised if we fail to find a connection between the countess and that sensational story in to-night's *Mercury*. I shall make it my business to meet this man Hunt. Well, what is the matter ? " A breathless footman stood before Varney, and stammered out something to the effect that Lord Merehaven had sent him here hot-foot in search of the doctor. A gentleman had been taken suddenly ill. The rest of the guests did not know anything about it, and the gentleman in question lay in a state of collapse in his lordship's study. Would Dr. Varney come

at once. Varney was on his way to the house before the footman had finished his halting explanation.

The study door was locked, but it was opened immediately on Varney whispering his name. In a big armchair a white-haired man in evening dress was lying back in a state of collapse. By his side stood Lord Merehaven, looking anxious and bewildered, whilst Ronald Hope was trying to force a little brandy between the lips of the unconscious figure in the chair.

"Thank goodness you have come, Varney!" Lord Merehaven said shakily. "It's poor old Reggie Lancing. He simply walked into here dragging on Hope's arm, and collapsed. He said something to the effect that his boy had committed suicide, and some rubbish about missing papers. What does it mean?"

Varney was too busy to answer the question. He removed Sir Reginald's collar and turned down the neckband. Meanwhile the patient was breathing heavily.

"Put him flat on the floor," Varney said. "It's not quite so bad as it looks. A seizure from over-excitement, or something of that kind. Give me a pen and ink and paper."

Varney hastily scribbled some formula on a sheet of note paper, and directed that it should be taken to a chemist and be made up at once. Till he could administer the drug he could do nothing. There was a wait of half an hour before the footman returned. Then the drug was coaxed between the stricken man's teeth, and presently he opened his eyes once more. He was terribly white and shaky, and he seemed to have some difficulty in getting out his words.

"Ronald Hope was trying to force a little brandy between the lips."

"It's the disgrace, Merehaven," he said—"the dreadful disgrace. To think that a son of mine could have been guilty of such a thing! I would not have believed it; it came to me quite as a shock—that paragraph in the late *Mercury*. I went to look for my son at once, but he had paid the penalty already. He had shot himself, Merehaven—shot himself—shot himself."

The old man repeated the last words again and again in a feeble kind of way. Lord Merehaven was sympathetic enough, but utterly puzzled. He looked at the other and shrugged his shoulders.

"Is this a mere delusion?" he asked. "You don't mean to say that Asturia business——"

The speaker paused, conscious that he was perhaps saying too much. Varney hastened to explain, to Merehaven's horror and astonishment. Positively, this was the first that he had heard of it. And if Captain Lancing had shot himself that was proof positive.

"Good heavens! what a terrible business altogether!" Lord Merehaven cried. "And the mischief that may have been done here! I must see the King of Asturia at once, late as it is, though goodness knows where I am to look, seeing that the king is——"

The speaker paused, and Ronald Hope took up the thread of the conversation.

"It may be possible, my lord," he said, "that his majesty is nearer at hand than you suppose."

CHAPTER XIII

THE MODERN JOURNALIST

THE old diplomatist looked coldly and suspiciously at the speaker. It was hardly the way for a young man to address a Cabinet Minister, and one who, moreover, was Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Varney saw what was passing through Lord Merehaven's mind and promptly interfered.

"For heaven's sake, don't stand on ceremony!" he said. "This is an exceedingly serious matter. Certain important papers are missing from the Foreign Office. It is alleged that confidence has been betrayed by Captain Lancing and Mr. Charles Maxwell. The boys are shouting it in the streets, probably most of your guests know all about it by this time. Those papers have been sold, or given to somebody who has made use of them. This is no canard to sell a few miserable papers."

"The documents you refer to were in my hands at seven o'clock," Lord Merehaven said. "I read them and made notes on the margin of them in my office not long before dinner——"

"And did you lock them up in your safe afterwards?" Varney asked.

"No, I didn't. There is no safe in my office. I gave the papers to Captain Lancing and Mr. Maxwell, and asked them to see that they were securely placed away. Then I came home. Do you mean to say that this thing has been over London for the past hour and I never knew it?"

"So it seems," Varney said coolly. "How should you know it when you have not been out of the house all the evening? And none of your guests could get at you to ask questions, seeing that you have been closeted with one ambassador or another ever since dinner."

"That's quite true," Lord Merehaven admitted moodily. "But what is to be done? You don't suggest that the contents of those papers is made public?"

"I fancy not," Varney replied. "My dear Sir Reginald, you have read that paragraph. What does it say?"

The stricken man in the armchair looked up with dulled eyes, It was some little time before he could be made to understand the drift of the question.

"I am trying to remember," he said, passing his hand over his forehead. "As far as I can recollect, there were no details given. The paragraph said that certain important papers had been stolen from the Foreign Office, and handed over to the enemies of this country. The editor of the *Mercury* was supposed to be in a position to vouch for this, and he hinted very freely at the identity of the culprits. A résumé of the missing papers was promised for the morning issue of the *Mercury* to-morrow. Then there was a break in the report, and down below a short history of my son's suicide. This was pointed to as an absolute confirmation of the news, the suggestion being that my son had shot himself after reading the nine o'clock edition of the *Mercury*, which contained the first part of the report."

"There is some foul and mysterious business

here," Ronald Hope said sternly. "It is only twenty minutes ago that I heard what the boys were calling out. I immediately took a hansom to Maxwell's rooms, to find that he had gone to Paris in a great hurry. He had left no message behind him. He had not even taken his man, whom he never travels without."

"He has fled," Merehaven said promptly. "This thing is absolutely true. What beats me is the prompt way in which these *Mercury* people collected the news."

"That is where I come in," Varney remarked. "We'll get Lechmere into this, if you don't mind? Sir Reginald had better stay here for the present. Lechmere shall go and interview Hunt of the *Mercury*. And if he does not bring back some very startling news, I shall be greatly mistaken."

Lechmere came into the study cool, collected, and imperturbable as ever. He had quite relinquished his old pursuits and occupations now, but he was delighted to do anything to be of service to Lord Merehaven and the Government; in point of fact, he would rather enjoy this adventure. What was he to do?

"Find Hunt of the *Mercury*," Varney said. "Run him down in a corner, and let him know that you are not the man to be trifled with. And when you have done that, make him tell you the exact time that he got his information over those missing papers."

Lechmere nodded without asking further questions. He knew that he would be told everything in time. He would do what he could, and return and report progress as soon as possible. His first move was to take a hansom and go down to the

office of the *Mercury* and there ask for Mr. Hunt. But Hunt was not in ; he had gone away about half-past seven and had not returned yet. Usually he looked in a little after midnight to see that the evening edition of the paper was progressing all right. So far as the chief sub-editor could say, Mr. Hunt had gone to the Carlton to supper.

"Something gained," Lechmere muttered, as he drove to the Carlton. "If that chap left the office at half-past seven, that sensational paragraph had already been passed for the Press. No assistant editor would dare to shove that into a paper on his own responsibility. Very smart of them to get Lancing's suicide. But I expect some American reporter shadowed the poor chap."

Mr. Hunt had been to the Carlton ; in fact, he had just arrived there, but he was in a private room with a lady, and had asked not to be disturbed. Intimating that he would wait, Lechmere took his seat at a little table in one of the public rooms and asked for something. He had a sovereign on the table by the side of his glass, and looked significantly at the waiter.

"That is for you to earn," he said, "if you are smart and do your work properly. In the first place, do you happen to know Mr. Hunt, the editor of the *Mercury* ? "

The man replied that he knew Mr. Hunt quite well. In fact, he was pretty intimately acquainted with all the American colony in London. Mr. Hunt supped at the Carlton frequently ; he was supping now with a lady in a room upstairs. Lechmere began to see his way.

"Did you happen to see the lady ? " he asked. "If so, what was she like ? "

"I saw them come not many minutes ago. In fact, they looked in here, and the lady wanted to take the table by the door, but Mr. Hunt said 'No.' They appeared to be in a great hurry, seeing that it is getting late; and it seemed to me that Mr. Hunt was not so amiable as usual. The lady was tall and dark; she had a black wrap, and under it was a dress of yellow satin."

"Good man!" Lechmere said with genial warmth. "You have earned your money. All you have to do now is to let me know the moment that Mr. Hunt is leaving the hotel. In any case it can't be long, because it is nearly twenty minutes past twelve now."

The waiter came back presently and pocketed his sovereign. Mr. Hunt and the lady were just leaving the hotel. Lechmere sauntered into the hall and stood watching the other two. He smiled to himself as he noted the face and features of Hunt's companion. A hansom stood at the door, and into it the American handed his companion and raised his hat.

"It will come out all right," Lechmere heard the lady say. "Don't look so annoyed. Your paper is not going to be allowed to suffer. Good-night!"

The hansom drove away, and Hunt raised his hat. As he stopped to light a cigarette, Lechmere crept up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. The American turned in a startled way.

"Mr. Lechmere!" he stammered. "Really, you gave me a start. If there is anything that I can do for you——?"

"There is," Lechmere said in a sharp, stern way. "I want to know the exact time that your office

received the unfortunate news of the Foreign Office business."

The directness of the attack took the American quite off his balance. The truth broke from him.

"About ten minutes to seven," he stammered. That is to say—— But, confound it all, what business is that of yours?"

Lechmere smiled; he could afford to let the other bluster now that he had learnt everything. He turned the matter aside as a joke. He made some remark about the beauty of the night, and a minute later he was bowling back in a hansom to Merehaven House.

"Yes, I have done pretty well," he said in reply to Varney's questioning gaze. "I have seen Hunt, whom I traced to the Carlton, where he was supping hastily in company with Countess Saens. I sort of fool-mated him over that paragraph, and he told me that the information reached the *Mercury* at about ten minutes to seven. He tried to bluster afterwards. but it was too late. At ten minutes to seven Hunt knew all about that scandal at the Foreign Office."

Lord Merehaven threw up his hands with a gesture of astonishment. Varney smiled.

"I knew that you would come back with some amazing information," the latter said. "See how the mystery gets thicker. Lord Merehaven is going to say something."

"I am going to say this," Merehaven remarked sternly. "The *Mercury* knew of those missing papers before seven o'clock. *At* seven o'clock those papers were in my hands, and the scandal had not begun then. And yet the *Mercury* paragraph, written before the robbery, is absolutely true! What does it mean?"

CHAPTER XIV

BAFFLED!

MEANWHILE, the Countess Saens had departed from Merehaven House with a smiling assurance to the effect that she did not anticipate any serious loss in consequence of the very mysterious robbery. She looked easy enough as she stepped into her brougham, drawn by the splendid bays that London knew so well by sight, and kissed her fingers gaily to her cavalier. But the brightness left her eyes when once she was alone. There was a keen, eager expression on her face then, a look of mingled anxiety and anger in her dark eyes. The most fascinating woman in London would have surprised her many admirers had they chanced to see her at that moment. She looked old and haggard; the smiling mouth had grown hard as a steel trap. She did not wait for the footman to open the door; she ran up the steps with a curt command that the carriage must wait, as she was presently going out again.

The trembling maid was upstairs awaiting the coming of her mistress. She had very little to add to what she had already said. Nothing appeared to have been disturbed. There was no sign of a robbery anywhere, save that one of the drawers in a dressing table had been turned out and the contents scattered on the floor.

"Now listen to me," the countess said. "Who paid for you to take those papers?"

"I know nothing of any papers, *non, non!*" the maid replied. "I take nothing. If madame wishes to suggest that I am a thief, I go. I leave to-night."

The girl paced up and down the room, her pale face held high. She was not used to being called a thief. If madame was not satisfied she would depart at once. The countess changed her tone.

"Now listen to me," she said more gently. "Just before dinner to-night I am in receipt of certain papers. Nobody knows that I possess them. For safe keeping I place them in that drawer and lock it up. Some time later you come to me with this story of the burglary. If jewels had been stolen, or money, I would have perhaps understood it, though your tale is so extraordinary that——"

"Not at all, madame," the maid cried hotly. "No more strange than the stories one reads every day in the newspapers. And there are no jewels missing."

"No, and that makes the affair all the more suspicious in my eyes. Nobody could have known about those papers, and yet the thief takes nothing else. A woman walks into the house as if it belonged to her, she goes direct to that drawer, and there you are! You say you saw the woman?"

The maid nodded sulkily; she did not look in the least guilty.

"I have already told madame so," she said. "I saw the woman twice to-night. The first time was when she was here, the second time at the residence of my Lord Merehaven. It was the lady in the satin dress who stood in the hall." The girl spoke in tones of perfect confidence. No ridicule on the part of the countess could shake her belief in the statement.

"But it is impossible," the latter said. "You are speaking of Miss Galloway. I saw Miss Galloway several times during the evening. If you are correct, she must have slipped away and changed her dress, committed the robbery, and be back here and changed her dress again—all in a quarter of an hour."

"Nevertheless, it was the same woman," the maid said with a stubborn air.

With a gesture of contempt the countess dismissed the girl. It was impossible to believe that she had had a hand in the disappearance of those precious papers. Perhaps the hall porter might have something to say in the matter. In the opinion of Countess Saens, the thief was non-existent. At any rate, the hall porter would be able to say.

The hall porter had not much to tell, but that little was to the point. Certainly, about the time mentioned by the maid a woman had come into the house. She had opened the hall door and had walked in herself as if she were quite at home there. She was plainly dressed in black and wore a veil. Then she proceeded to walk upstairs.

"You mean to say that you did nothing to interfere?" the countess asked.

"Well, no, madame," the hall porter admitted. "The young woman appeared to be quite at home; evidently she had been here many times before, and I thought she was a friend of Annette's. Friends of hers do come here sometimes after you have gone out, and one or two of them walk in. So I took no notice whatever. A little time after, the young woman came back as if she were in a hurry, and hastened out of the house. Just as she was gone I heard Annette call out. Thinking that something was the matter, I rushed up the stairs. When I knew

what was wrong it was too late to go after the thief."

So Annette had been telling the truth, the countess thought. She was furiously angry at her loss, but it was impossible to blame anybody. It was a stroke of the sword after the countess's own heart. But there were disquieting circumstances behind it that frightened her.

"You had better send again to the nearest police-station," she said. "Let them know that I have gone out and shall not be back for some little time."

With a frown between her delicate brows the countess drove away. In all her bold, dashing, adventurous life she had never been confronted by a more difficult problem than this. She was playing for tremendously high stakes, and her share of the victory was the price of a throne. Once this thing was accomplished, she had no need ever to plot or scheme or trick again. A fortune would be hers, and she would sit secure as a leader of fashion for the rest of her days.

An hour ago and the game was as good as won. Everything had been done so secretly; nobody guessed anything. Another day, and nothing could save the crown in question. And yet in a moment the whole dream had been shattered Somebody knew exactly what was going on, somebody was at work to checkmate the dark design. And that somebody was bold and daring to a degree. If the countess only knew who the other woman was! It was maddening to work in the dark against so clever a foe. If your enemy knows you and you don't know your enemy, he has a tremendous advantage. The countess clenched her teeth together viciously as she thought of it.

The carriage stopped at length outside the Carlton

Hotel, and almost immediately Hunt, the editor of the *Evening Mercury*, appeared. He looked uneasy and anxious.

"Your message came all right," he said. "I came here at once and ordered supper, though we shall not have much time to talk."

"Then let us go into the room at once," the countess said; "though as to appetite, why——"

"But I ordered the supper in a private room," Hunt protested. "One never knows what people may hear. What is the use of arguing? The supper is all ready for us."

They were in the private room at length. They made some pretence of eating and drinking till the two waiters had for the time being departed. Then Hunt turned to his companion.

"What has happened?" he asked. There was nothing of deference in his manner. It was quite evident that the smart little American editor was no squire of dames. "Your manner was so mysterious. And it is time you did something for your money. Two thousand pounds is a deal to pay for——"

"Such information as I have already given you?" the countess interrupted. "I don't think so, seeing what a tremendous sensation you secured to-night."

"But those other papers," Hunt protested. "You promised me the full details of that private understanding between England and Asturia. I have told my readers boldly that they shall have it in the morning issue of my paper to-morrow morning. If you want the extra money——"

"Man, I want it as an old man wants youth. It is vitally necessary to me. And can't you see

that it is to my interest that those papers should be published to the world? It will be a staggering blow to England, and a corresponding advantage to Russia. I should have seen that those papers saw the light whether I was paid for them or not. But they are worth a great deal to you, and that is why I approached you in the matter."

"Yes, yes," Hunt said impatiently. "Please get on. I came here to receive those papers—in fact, the *Mercury* is waiting for them at this moment. If you will hand them over to me you shall have the other cheque for five thousand posted to you to-night. Where are they?"

The countess laughed derisively. There was a gleam of wild fury in her dark eyes.

"It is impossible," she said. "Out of the question. Strange as it may seem, those papers were stolen from my house to-night by some woman whom I would give five years of my life to know."

CHAPTER XV

THE SEARCH

HUNT'S expression was not polite, nor was it intended for ears feminine. His almost eager face fell; he was evidently thinking of nothing else but his paper. He would have ruined every kingdom in the universe, including the State that gave him birth, to get a scoop on his rivals. Just for a moment it flashed across his mind that he had been betrayed for higher money.

But that was hardly possible. No English paper would have dared to give that information to the world. It would have aroused the indignation of every patriotic Briton, and the circulation of even the yellowest in the world would have suffered. And the expression of the countess's face was no acting.

"It seems almost incredible," Hunt said. "Please tell me all about it."

The countess proceeded to relate the story. It seemed to him that the case was not quite hopeless after all. True, he would not be able to enjoy the prospective triumph of his paper over the others, but as an able and adroit journalist he would know how to get out of the difficulty.

"Well, you have a clue anyway," he said. "Miss Galloway is a strikingly beautiful girl, with a very marked type of loveliness, and if the thief was so like her as to make your maid certain that Miss Galloway was the real thief, the culprit is not far to seek. You don't think yourself——"

"That Vera Galloway is the thief? Of course not. The thing is physically impossible. Besides, Vera Galloway does not take the slightest interest in politics. She is quite a butterfly. And yet the whole thing is very strange. What puzzles me most is the infinite acquaintance the thief appears to have with my house. She could not have walked in like that to my bedroom unless she had a fine knowledge of the geography of the place."

"I'll make a stirring half column of it," Hunt said—"showing no connection between your loss and that Asturian business, of course. We'll hint that the papers were stolen by somebody who fancied that she had a claim on your vast Russian estates. See what I mean. And we'll make fun of the fact that your maid recognized Miss Galloway as the culprit. That will set people talking. We'll offer a reward of £100 for a person who first finds the prototype of Miss Galloway. See? Unless I'm greatly mistaken, we shall precious soon get to the bottom of this business."

The countess nodded and smiled approvingly. The cunning little scheme appealed to her. She pushed her plate and glass away with which she had been toying. At the same moment a waiter came and handed her a note, which she opened and read with a flushed face.

"It appears as if the police had actually succeeded in doing something for once," she said. "This is from one of the Scotland Yard men, saying that a woman in black dress and veil, answering to the description given by Annette, has been taken to Charing Cross Hospital after being knocked down by a passing cab. This may or may not mean anything, but it is distinctly encouraging. I am

told that I shall know more in the morning. But that is not good enough for me."

"Don't do anything impetuous," Hunt said anxiously.

"I am not in the habit of doing impulsive things," the countess replied. "At the same time, I am going to Charing Cross Hospital to-night to make sure. It is quite time we finished this discussion, as you have to alter your plans and write that paragraph. Let us be going."

A little later and the countess was proceeding in her brougham eastwards. Hunt had parted from Lechmere, too, after the latter had derived his useful piece of information from the startled editor. But the countess did not know anything of that. And as she was approaching the well-known hospital, Jessie Harcourt was reaching it in another direction in the motor-car of Lascelles, otherwise known as "Pongo." The nearer she approached to her destination the more nervous did the girl become.

"Awfully jolly ride," Lascelles grinned. "Glad you put that black thing over your head, though. It's a pity to cut the thing short, but I suppose the joke has gone far enough?"

"Not quite," Jessie said between her teeth. "I am going to confide in you, Mr. Lascelles——"

"Called me 'Pongo' just now," the other said in tones of deep reproach. "It seems to me——"

"Well, Pongo, then—dear Pongo, if you like," Jessie said desperately. "I am going to confide in you. I want you to put me down close to the hospital, and then you go back without me. You may infer that I did not care for the business, and that I returned home by the front door. Then at the end of

half an hour or so, you are to declare that the sport is over for the night and ride off as if seeking your chauffeur. After that you are to come here and fetch me back. You understand ? "

It was quite plain, from the blank expression of Lascelles' face, that he did not understand. The familiar air had left him; he had grown stiff and almost stern.

" I don't quite follow," he said. " Of course, if I choose to play the ass—which, by the way, I am getting a little tired of—why, that hurts nobody. But when a lady who I respect and admire asks me to become a party, don't you know, to what looks like some—er—vulgar assignation——"

" You are wrong," Jessie cried. " You are a gentleman ; you have more sense than I expected. I pledge you my word of honour that this is no assignation. It is a case of life and death, a desperate case. I am going into the hospital; it is important that nobody should know of my visit—none of my own friends, I mean. I could come back in a hansom, but danger lies that way. I have no money for one thing. Mr. Lascelles, please believe that I am telling the truth."

The girl's troubled eyes turned on the listener's face. Lascelles would have been less than a man had he not yielded, sorely against his judgment as it was.

" I'll do it," he said. " No woman ever yet appealed to me in vain. Because I play the ass people think that I don't notice things, but they are mistaken. I've never done anything yet to be ashamed of, anyway. And I'm not going to begin now. It seems to me that you are making a great sacrifice for somebody else. If I could feel quite sure that that somebody else was a——"

"Woman? It *is* a woman! I felt quite sure that I could rely upon you. Now please go back and act exactly as I have suggested. When you come to know the truth—as assuredly you shall some day—I am quite certain that you will never repent what you are doing to-night."

Lascelles was equally certain of it. He was quite convinced now that he was no party to anything wrong. All the same, his face was very grave as he helped Jessie from the car, and placed her wrap more carefully around her. It was a long black wrap, covering her head and face and reaching to the ground, so that the girl's rich dress was quite hidden.

"Half an hour," Jessie whispered. "It may be a little longer. I can trust your discretion. At first I was a little afraid that perhaps you might—but in your new character you are quite reliable. Do not stay any longer or we shall attract attention."

Lascelles wheeled his car round and started westward once more. Jessie hesitated just a minute to make quite sure that she had her permit in her pocket, when a two-horse brougham dashed up. Evidently some fashionable doctor summoned in a hurry, Jessie thought. But when she looked again at the perfectly appointed equipage, with its fine horses and its silver harness, she knew better. The thing was too fashionable and glittering for a doctor; besides, no man in the profession would use such a turn-out at night. Then, as Jessie looked again, her heart beat more violently as she recognized the face of the occupant. It was the Countess Saens. What did she want at this hour of the night? No errand of mercy, Jessie felt quite sure, for the Countess Saens did not bear that reputation.

Then like a flash it came to the girl standing hesitatingly on the pavement. The countess had found some clue, possibly through the assertions of the maid Annette that the sham Miss Galloway was the thief who was responsible for the burglary. It was possible for such a train of thought to be started and worked out logically in that brilliant brain. But there was one other thing that Jessie would have given a great deal to know—How had the countess discovered that the real Miss Galloway was detained by an accident at Charing Cross Hospital?

Well, Jessie would know in a very few minutes. The countess stepped out of her carriage and made her way into the hall of the hospital. She could be seen talking to the porter, who shook his head. Evidently the countess was asking for something that was against the rules. Again the man shook his head. Jessie felt that a crisis was at hand. She stood on the pavement hesitatingly, so eager that her hand fell from her face; her features were distinct and lovely in the strong rays of light. A man walking past her in a great hurry stopped, and an exclamation broke from him.

"Vera!" he said hurriedly. "Vera, won't you speak to me? Great heavens! A chance like this——"

Instantly Jessie guessed what had happened. She was face to face with Vera's lover, Charles Maxwell!"

CHAPTER XVI

WAS IT RUSSIA?

DR. VARNEY went slowly and thoughtfully back to the house after seeing Jessie start on her adventure. The brilliant old scientist had ample food for thought as he walked along. It was not as if he did not thoroughly grasp the situation. He had a reputation for something besides medicine; his practice largely lay amongst diplomatists and statesmen. Once, even, he had been summoned to a consultation on the illness of a king.

So that he knew most of the inner political game by heart. He could be bold and discreet at the same time. Very little of the scandal that hung over the Asturian throne like a blighting cloud was hidden from him. He could have placed his finger on the fatal blot at once.

In the library, Lord Merehaven with Ronald Hope and Lechmere were still talking over matters. Sir Reginald Lancing had disappeared, to Varney's relief. The stricken old man had avowed himself to be better. He was sorry that he had obtruded his grief on his friends; he would like to go home at once; he did not wish for anybody to accompany him.

"All this is very irregular," Lord Merehaven was saying as Varney joined the group again and carefully closed the door behind him. "According to all precedent I should not discuss this matter with you gentlemen at all."

"But think what we may accomplish," Ronald said eagerly. "The whole scandal may be averted. I fancy that you can trust everybody here, my lord."

"I have been the recipient of a few secrets in my time," Lechmere said drily. "Lord Merehaven will not forget what my audacity accomplished in the Moscow case."

"Officially, I know nothing about it," Lord Merehaven murmured. "Officially——"

"Officially you know nothing about this matter," Lechmere interrupted with some impatience. "A Minister cannot hold himself responsible for the statements made in an irresponsible paper which is notoriously controlled by Americans. The *Mercury* suggests that certain papers have been stolen, and that one of the culprits has fled, whilst the other has committed suicide. Who shall say that Mr. Maxwell has fled? Certainly he has departed suddenly for Paris. Unfortunately, Captain Lancing has committed suicide. At the same time, it is a notorious fact that he has had heavy losses at cards and on the turf, which may account for everything. And as to those papers alleged to be stolen, why, Lord Merehaven had them in his own hands at seven o'clock to-night."

"An excellent piece of political logic," said Lord Merehaven. "I could not have given a better explanation from my place in the House. But I fear that if I were pressed to say that I had taken steps to discover if those papers were intact——. You see my position?"

"I must speak plainly," Lechmere went on. "It is any odds that the papers have gone. The thing has been arranged for some time; the house where the papers were to be handed over to the arch thief

was actually fixed. The arch thief, taking the thing as a settled fact, gave a broad outline of what was going to happen to the editor of the *Evening Mercury*. He saw a chance of a 'scoop,' and decided to take the chance of the papers not being delivered. If there was a hitch at the last moment, Hunt could easily wriggle out of it. But the papers changed hands, and Hunt's bold plan was justified. Lancing saw the paragraph and shot himself."

"But why should he shoot himself?" Lord Merehaven asked.

"I fancy that is pretty obvious," Lechmere went on. "Lancing was betrayed. Don't you see that Hunt promised to-morrow to give a *précis* of the stolen documents? If my deductions are correct, Lancing only borrowed the papers on the distinct understanding that they should be returned. Lancing had a large sum of money for that act of his. If we find that he had considerable cash about him I shall be certain. No sooner had he parted with the papers than he was coolly betrayed. The receiver of the papers simply laughed at him. Who was the receiver of the papers?"

"Some foe of England," Lord Merehaven said. "A Russian agent probably. If those papers are made public we shall have our trouble for our pains in Asturia, and Russia will buy the King of Asturia out. So far, I can see this thing quite plainly."

"You are right beyond a doubt, my lord," Lechmere went on. "With your permission I am going to locate exactly where those papers went. They went to a woman."

"I should doubt that," Lord Merehaven said. "I should doubt it very much indeed."

"Nevertheless, I am going to prove it to you," said Lechmere.

"Those papers must have been disposed of after seven o'clock to-night. By nine o'clock Lancing had read in print how he had been cruelly betrayed. Well, with all his faults, Lancing was a man of high courage. He had great physical strength as well. What did he do directly he read that paragraph and saw that he had been deluded. Did he go off and shoot himself at once? Not he! He got up from the dinner table of his club quite quietly and called a hansom. Obviously he was going to lose no time in seeing the person to whom he delivered the important State papers. Is that logic?"

The listeners standing round the fire-place admitted that it was. Interest was painted on every face.

"We know now that Lancing failed in his mission which was proved by the fact that he returned to his club and shot himself there. Now, I conclude that Lancing did not fail to find his deceiver. He would not have given up the search so easily as all that. It was not the man's character, nor could the deceiver have left London, because it was imperative that the same deceiver should be on the spot to watch the progress of events. My idea is that Lancing saw the deceiver and failed to get the papers back."

"Then where does his strength and courage come in?" Merehaven asked. "Remember that you began to draw a series of inferences from that same courage."

"I have not finished yet, my lord," Lechmere said quietly. "Lancing failed because his courage and personal strength was useless in this case.

If he had been dealing with a man he would not have hesitated. But poor Lancing was seriously handicapped by the fact that he had a woman for his antagonist. You can't ill-treat a woman; you can't damage her features and knock her teeth out. And that is why Lancing failed. He saw the woman, and she laughed at him. She defied him to do his worst. He could not denounce her without proclaiming his own shame, and the clever woman traded on that. Therefore Lancing went and shot himself. What do you think of my argument?

It was evident from the silence that followed that each of the little group was considerably impressed by the clear logic of the speaker's story. It was not often that Lechmere said so much, though his reputation was high, and more than one knotty trouble had been solved by him.

"Our friend is absolutely right," Varney said at length. "The more I think of it the more certain I am. Perhaps he can tell us the name of the woman?"

"That I am also in a position to do," Lechmere proceeded, without the slightest shade of triumph in his voice. "Accident helped me to that. In the hall some time ago there was a little scene between Countess Saens and her maid. The maid came to say that a strange robbery had taken place at the house of the countess. Nothing had been taken but papers from a certain drawer. Now I was close by and heard that, and I had a good opportunity of seeing that lady's face. Rage, anger, despair, murder almost, danced like so many devils in her dark eyes. The countess was quick to recover herself, but she had betrayed herself to me. I did not think so very much of this at the time, but when I

subsequently saw the countess leave the house and subsequently find that she had gone off to have supper with Hunt of the *Evening Mercury* in a private room at the Carlton, I knew as well as if she had told me that she had met Hunt to tell him why she could not give him the chance of printing the crux of those stolen papers in the morning edition of the *Mercury*—for the simple reason that the papers had in turn been stolen from her."

Ronald Hope turned as if to speak, then as suddenly changed his mind. It would be a mistake to still further complicate matters at this junction, he thought.

"It was to Countess Saens that Lancing delivered those papers," Lechmere said finally. "Lord Merehaven looks dubious; but his lordship does not know, and I do, that the brilliant society creature, Countess Saens, is really one of the cleverest adventuresses in Europe—a police spy, passing as a kind of socialist and the rest. If I could see the King of Asturia——"

"You shall," Varney snapped out. "You shall see him before half an hour has passed. Stay where you are and—— Stop! Hope, keep an eye on Prince Mazaroff, and see that he does not leave the house."

CHAPTER XVII

A BOW AT A VENTURE

WITH a strong feeling of congratulation that he had gleaned the whole story of her wild adventure from Jessie Harcourt, Varney walked coolly up the staircase. He had little difficulty in locating the room where the dissolute ruler of Asturia lay. It was the only locked door in that corridor, and he had the key in his pocket, which key, it will be remembered, Jessie handed over to him.

The lights were still burning there; the king still lay in the huddled uniform of General Maxgregor on the bed. At the end of the corridor a telephone gleamed. Varney crossed over and called up his own confidential servant, to whom he gave a long message. This being done, he returned to the bedroom and carefully locked the door behind him. He crossed over to the bed and shook the royal occupant much as a policeman shakes a drunken tramp asleep in a gutter.

"Get up," he said. "Get up; you are wanted at once. And drink this—do you hear?"

The blear-eyed wretch sat up in bed. He was shaking from head to foot. His hands shook as he held them out for the contents of the bottle that Varney was holding—the rest of the drug that had been administered to Sir Reginald Lancing.

"I hope it won't hurt me," the king whispered. "My doctor here, Dr. Varney——"

"I am Dr. Varney," said the latter coldly, "only you are still too drunk to know who I am. I am not likely to give you anything harmful—at least, not for the present. Where are your clothes? You never came here in that uniform."

"I was in evening dress," the king said helplessly. "Somebody must have changed with me. Look and see, there's a good fellow. Must have been a big fellow who played this trick on me."

Varney gave a grunt of disappointment. He recollected now that Maxgregor had gone off in the guise of the king. Therefore, if the king had that proposed treaty of abdication in his pocket, the same was in the possession of Maxgregor at this moment.

"You are in the house of Lord Merehaven," Varney said. "You should have come here to-night with the queen. In the interests of your country, and in the interests of Europe, you should have been here. Instead of that you go off somewhere and get wretchedly drunk in some gambling-house. It was by great good luck that you were found and conveyed secretly here by the garden entrance. Kings have done some disgraceful things in their time, but nothing quite so bad as your conduct to-night. Where is the document that Prince Mazaroff gave you to sign?"

It was a bow drawn at a venture, but the shaft went home.

"I don't know," the king groaned. "I put it in my pocket. It was not the thing to sign all at once. Shouldn't have pluck enough whilst I was sober. Then I had too much champagne. What was that you gave me to drink just now? Seems to make a new man of me. Haven't felt so fit and

well for years. Feel as if I could do anything now."

"You'll want all your manhood presently," Varney said coolly. "Your father was a man of courage, as I found out for myself in his last painful illness. You had pluck enough as a boy; you'd have it again now if you dropped your champagne. Wash yourself well, and make yourself look as respectable as possible. We are going downstairs."

"What, like this!" the king cried in dismay. "In a uniform that is far too big——"

"Nothing of the kind. There is a change coming for you from your hotel. My confidential servant is seeing to it, and he will be here presently. With clean clothes and linen and an order or two you will be a passable king yet. Go and wash yourself at once. You are in my hands to-night."

There was a cold, stinging contempt in Varney's tones by no means lost on the listener. Perhaps some sense of shame was stirring within him, for no reproof rose to his trembling, bibulous lips. Varney passed out presently, locking the door behind him as coolly as if he had been a gaoler. At the foot of the stairs a neat-looking footman was waiting with a parcel for Varney. As he took it Hope crossed the hall. There was a look of alertness, a desire for battle in his face.

"What is going on?" Varney asked. "Something seems to have happened?"

"Count Gleikstein is here," Ronald whispered. "The Russian *chargé d'affaires*, in the absence at St. Petersburg of the Ambassador. You can imagine what he has come for. There was a great battle of wits going on in the salon. The Queen of Asturia is talking to Gleikstein, and I have secured the presence of Prince Mazaroff. Lechmere looks

anxious for the fray, and I should say from the expression on his face that he has a knife up his sleeve. If we could play some strong card——"

"We are going to," Varney snapped, as he hugged his bundle under his arm. "Only keep the ball rolling for another quarter of an hour, and I shall be ready for you. Listen!"

Very rapidly Varney whispered a few instructions into the ear of Hope. The latter grinned delightedly, then his face grew grave again. The thing was serious enough, and yet there was a fine element of comedy in it. It was diplomacy gone mad. On the hall stand was a stack of visiting cards. On one of them, chosen at haphazard, Hope wrote a message. He trusted that the queen would understand; in fact, he felt sure that she would.

The little group in the salon, under the famous Romney and the equally famous Velasquez, was a striking one—the Queen of Asturia, tall and stately, and smiling as if perfectly at her ease; by her side Count Gleikstein, the Russian *chargé d'affaires*, slim waisted, dark of face and stern of eye, yet with a waxed moustache and an air that gave a suggestion of effeminacy to him. Lechmere was lounging by in a listless kind of way, and yet from time to time there was an eager tightening of his mouth that proved him ready for the fray. Prince Mazaroff completed the group.

Ronald Hope came up with a respectful bow, and tendered the card to the queen. She glanced at it leisurely; her face betrayed nothing as she read the message and handed the card back to Ronald again. One grateful look flashed from her eyes.

"I regret that I cannot," she said. "I have so many calls of that kind on my time. If the lady is a

friend of yours, Captain Hope, I may stretch a point in her favour. She may call on my secretary at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning."

Ronald bowed deeply as if charged with a message, and hastened into the hall. The card he tore into small fragments and cast into a waste paper basket under one of the hall tables. Then he went back to the striking group under the picture again.

"I am afraid that it concerns all of us," the count was saying in a dangerously insinuating voice. Of course, one can hardly be responsible for what the papers say, but in the present dangerous state of public opinion in Asturia—the queen will pardon me?"

"I pardon anybody who does their duty to their country at any cost," the queen said. "If we could produce those papers that your royal master is so suspicious about——"

"Then I am to understand that some papers of importance have really been stolen?" the count said swiftly.

"On the contrary, you are not to understand anything of the kind," Lord Merehaven smiled. "My dear count, I could lead you a fine wild-goose chase if I chose to allow your imagination free run. As a matter of fact, the papers you allude to were in my own hands at seven o'clock this evening. It is hardly possible that they could have been stolen and their contents made known to an American paper within an hour from that time. So easy am I in my mind that I have not even sent down to my office to see if the papers are still extant. And when you see the King of Asturia——"

"But I understand that he has gone to Paris?" Count Gleikstein said, with a swift, meaning glance

at the queen. "Of course, if his majesty were here, and could give us an assurance that he has in no way given his authority and let you know what I mean. I am afraid that those agreeable Bohemian excursions that his majesty is so fond of are not regarded in Asturia in the same liberal light that they might be. Still, your assurance, my dear Lord Merehaven, will not——"

"Will not weigh like that of his majesty," Merehaven said. "If he were only here——"

"He has been detained," the queen said, ignoring a meaning smile that passed between the count and Prince Mazaroff. "If I could only have a message——"

A quick, smothered cry broke from Mazaroff as he looked to the door. Gleikstein followed his glance, and his face fell wofully. The queen smiled and advanced one step towards the door. Her dark eyes were filled with a great and lasting joy.

"I think your kindness is going to be rewarded, count," she said. "Yes, I was not mistaken."

A tall footman in the doorway announced—"His Majesty the King of Asturia!"

CHAPTER XVIII

WATCHING

IT was not difficult for Jessie to guess the identity of the man who addressed her. Only a man who loved and felt sure that he was loved in return would have spoken to a girl like that. This was Charles Maxwell beyond a doubt. Nice-looking enough, Jessie thought, with a pleasing, amiable face—perhaps a trifle too amiable, but there was no mistaking the power in the lines of the mouth.

"What are you doing here like this?" he asked. "Heavens! has all the world gone mad to-night?"

The bitterness of despair rang in the speaker's voice. Jessie noticed that Maxwell was dressed not in the least like men in his position usually dress at that time of the night. He wore a grey flannel suit and a panama hat pulled down over his eyes.

"I came on urgent business," Jessie said. "I presume that you are Mr. Maxwell?"

"Why should I deny it?" the other asked. "I am Charles Maxwell, and the most miserable dog in London. But I am forgetting. Why do you ask me such a foolish question, Vera?"

"Because I want to be quite sure of my ground," Jessie said. "And because I am not Miss Vera Galloway at all. If you look at me very closely you will see that for yourself."

Maxwell stared at Jessie in a dull, wooden kind of way, as if the whole thing were past his comprehension.

"Yes," he said, "there is a difference, but it is so subtle that even I should not have noticed it unless you had called my attention to it. But I know who you are now. You are Miss Harcourt, daughter of Colonel Harcourt, late of the —th. I have often told Vera of the wonderful likeness between you. If you should ever meet her in private life——"

"I have met her, I am personating her at the present moment," Jessie whispered.

"Amazing!" Maxwell exclaimed. "But I understood that you were—that you had been—in short——"

"Engaged in a Bond Street shop," Jessie finished the sentence. "So I was till to-day, when I was discharged through no fault of my own. Miss Galloway sent for me to take her place. Secretly I have played her part all this evening. And she went away dressed in my simple black clothes——"

"But why?" Maxwell demanded jealously. "Why all this absurd mystery?"

"Surely you can guess? Why do you look so suspicious? I am not altogether in Miss Galloway's confidence, but I understand that she wanted to save somebody whom she loved—somebody that was in trouble. It requires no great intelligence to guess that you were the person in question. It was all connected with those papers missing from the Foreign Office."

"I know no more about it than the dead," Maxwell said vehemently. "The papers in question—and others—were as much in Lancing's custody as

mine. It was he who was to blame, though I admit that I locked the papers away to-night after Lord Merehaven had done with them. When I saw the *Mercury* I was horror-stricken. I guessed exactly what had happened."

"How could you guess what had happened?" Jessie asked.

"Because I have had my suspicions for some time," Maxwell said. "I dismissed those suspicions as unworthy of me and insulting to Captain Lancing. I know that he was greatly infatuated with Countess Saens, whom a Mr. Lechmere, a late Queen's Messenger, had warned me against as no better than a Russian spy. Lancing was mad over her. There is not the slightest doubt that she induced Lancing to let her have those papers to copy. Then she refused to return them, and Lancing committed suicide. That is what I make of it."

"The sensational report in the *Mercury* went farther than that," Jessie said. "It is assumed that you are a party to the conspiracy, and that you fled to Paris. Is that true, or going to be true?"

"As heaven is my witness, no," Maxwell said in a hoarse whisper. "When I had made up my mind what had happened, I determined to get possession of those papers. I vanished, saying that I was called suddenly to Paris. For the last four hours I have been dogging Countess Saens. I followed her here, and I am not going to lose sight of her until she is safely at home. And when she is once safely at home, I am going to do a desperate and daring thing. What is she doing here?"

Jessie made no reply for the moment. She had pulled her wrap over her face again so that she should not be recognized. She was watching the

movements of Countess Saens breathlessly. The woman had passed up the steps into the big hall beyond the swinging glass doors. She seemed to be arguing with a porter, who shook his head in an emphatic way. Evidently the countess was angry; so much could be seen from her gestures and the shake of her shoulders.

"She is trying to see a patient at irregular hours," Jessie said, "and the porter is adamant. I pray from the bottom of my heart that she may fail."

"Is this another piece in the puzzle?" Maxwell asked hopelessly.

"It is the key-piece of the problem," said Jessie. "Ah, the porter is not to be moved. He has sent off an under porter, possibly to call one of the house surgeons. See, the countess sits down."

Surely enough the countess had flung herself angrily into a seat. Nobody seemed to care much about her, for she waited ten minutes without any sign of anybody in authority. Meanwhile Jessie was making Maxwell *au fait* with the situation.

"You threatened some dangerous and desperate enterprise a little later on," she said. "I suppose that is a supreme effort to try and get those papers?"

"You have guessed it," Maxwell said grimly. "If I could do that, the whole situation would be saved. We could do anything; we could point to Lancing's suicide as the result of reckless gambling. Mind you, that would be more or less true. If Lancing had not been desperately situated, he would never have yielded to the countess's fascinations and sold those precious documents."

"Yes, yes," Jessie interrupted. "But unless I am greatly mistaken, you have been forestalled.

Somebody else has already removed the documents from Countess Saens's custody."

"You don't really mean that! What was it—a case of diamond cut diamond?"

"Yes, but not quite in the way you imagine. Those papers were stolen in turn from Countess Saens to-night, taken from a drawer in her bedroom by Miss Galloway."

Maxwell pressed his hands to his head. The situation was too much for him. He groaned for an explanation.

"I can only surmise," Jessie said. "But presently you will have to admit that I have very strong grounds for my surmises. In some way Miss Galloway obtained a clue to what was about to happen. That is why I was called in to take her place, so that she could have an hour or two without being suspected. An hour or so ago Countess Saens's maid came to Merehaven House with the information that there had been a burglary in the countess's bedroom, but that nothing besides some papers seemed to be missing. That those papers were important could be guessed by the ghastly yet furious expression on the lady's face. The maid was pressed for a description of the thief—who, by the by, was a woman. And then and there the maid pitched upon *me*. She declared point blank that it was I who committed the burglary. What do you think of that?"

"You are a clever young lady," Maxwell said hoarsely. "Pray go on."

"The maid stuck to her guns, though everybody laughed at her. She said the thief was dressed in plain black, and as I was in evening dress, and had been seen all the evening, those who heard were amused. But *I* understood. In my plain black

dress Miss Galloway had gone to the countess's house and stolen those papers. The thing was as clear as daylight to anybody behind the scenes. Under the circumstances, your prospective burglary would be so much loss of time."

"I quite understand that," Maxwell muttered. "It is exceedingly clever of you to read between the lines so clearly. Vera has done this for my sake. But how did she know—how could she possibly tell what was going to happen, and when those papers were to be found? Of course, *I* guessed where the trouble lay directly I saw the *Mercury* paragraph, but Vera! And she never takes the slightest interest in politics. What are you looking at?"

Once more Jessie was staring intently past the swinging doors of the hospital into the big hall beyond. The countess had now risen from her chair and was facing a little man with a bald head and gold-rimmed spectacles, who appeared to be explaining something to her. Jessie could see him bow and shake his head. Her breath came very fast.

"Why are you so interested in the countess's present action?" Maxwell asked.

"Because she has come here to try and see a patient," Jessie whispered intently. "From the bottom of my heart, I pray that she may fail. If she succeeds we are ruined, you are ruined. For the patient is no other than Vera Galloway."

CHAPTER XIX

THE QUEST OF THE PAPERS

"I SUPPOSE I shall be able to take it all in presently," Maxwell said feebly. "Vera is a patient here, and the countess has come to see her. But would you mind explaining to me why Vera is here, what has happened to her, and what that fiend of a woman desires to know?"

"It was a case of cruel misfortune," Jessie said. "Miss Galloway was knocked down by a passing cab in Piccadilly and brought here. She was not so badly hurt, because she had the sense to call herself by my name. Besides, Dr. Varney saw her here. And Dr. Varney discovered my secret, so that I was obliged to confide in him. Now do you see?"

"I can't see where the Countess Saens comes in," Maxwell murmured.

"You are not very wise or long sighted for a diplomatist," Jessie said with a faint smile. "Don't you see that the countess's maid's suspicions fell on fruitful soil? When she left Merehaven House for her own, she discovered the full significance of her loss. Then she began to put things together. She had an idea that a trick had been played upon her. She had the police in——"

"Yes, but how did she discover that anybody answering to Vera's description was *here?*"

"Easily enough. Her maid gave the description of the thief. Then the police began to make in-

quiries. They discover that a girl in black answering to the maid's description has been brought here after an accident. They tell the countess as much. The police don't worry about the matter for the present, because their bird is quite safe. But that is not good enough for the countess. She comes here to make sure for herself; she suspects the trick."

"I confess that you are too clever for me," Maxwell sighed. "And yet everything you say is absolutely clear and convincing. I am afraid that there is still further trouble looming ahead. How did you get to know what had happened?"

"Miss Galloway sent me a message by a district boy. The idea was that I was to try and see her without delay, and go on playing my part until we could resume our respective personalities. Without some further coaching such a thing was impossible. I took Dr. Varney into my confidence, and he gave me a permit to see Vera Galloway to-night. I am here at considerable risk, as you understand, though I have prepared for my return to Merehaven House. Ah, she has failed."

The countess was standing up and gesticulating wildly before the little man in the gold-rimmed glasses. He seemed to be profoundly sorry, but he was quite firm. He signalled the porter, who opened one of the big glass doors and signified that the countess could depart.

Even her fascinations have failed," Jessie said. "Please let me go, Mr. Maxwell. If I am recognized now everything is ruined. And you had better not be seen, either."

"Every word that you say is replete with wisdom," Maxwell said. "One moment. I must see

you again to-night and know how things are going. Will you meet me in an hour's time in the garden at the back of Merehaven House? Don't say no."

"If it can possibly be managed," said Jessie. "Now I must go. You had better get into the shadow across the road. I feel that all is going to be well yet."

Maxwell lounged away, and Jessie passed quickly along as the countess came down the steps and stepped into her brougham. Jessie waited to see the flashing equipage drive away before she turned again and in her turn mounted the steps of the hospital.

Jessie boldly demanded to see a patient named Harcourt, and thrust her permit into the porter's hand. He looked a little suspicious over this fuss about a mere patient, but the name on the permit had its force, and presently Jessie found herself entering one of the wards under the charge of a nurse. The nurse glanced at Jessie's half-concealed face, and came to the natural conclusion that here was a sister of the latest accident case. Under the circumstances, she had no hesitation in leaving Jessie and Vera Galloway together.

"Thank Heaven you have come!" Vera whispered. "No, there is not much the matter. I suppose I must have fainted at the shock and the pain, but the doctor says I shall be out in two or three days at the outside. It is a case of bruised tendons more than anything else. You dear, brave girl!"

The dear, brave girl forced a smile to her lips. All the same, the prospect was alarming. It was one thing to carry this imposture through for an hour or two, but quite another to keep the comedy

going for some days longer. But audacity carries such things through.

"Tell me everything that has happened," Vera went on. "Don't let us dwell on this cruel misfortune. Everything seemed going so well when that wretched cab came along. Perhaps I was dazed by my success. I know that I was shaking from head to foot. . . but that mattered to nobody but myself. Tell me."

Jessie proceeded with her story. She had a deeply interested listener. Vera turned from side to side and her face grew pale as she listened to the amazing story that Jessie told her.

"So I am in danger," she said. "The countess suspects. And it was all true, all about Charles and Captain Lancing. I heard that as I came along. If I could only see Charlie——"

"I saw him not five minutes ago," Jessie said. "Perhaps I had better finish my story, and then you can ask any questions you like afterwards."

Vera composed herself to listen with what patience she could. Her white face was flushed and hot before Jessie had finished. The latter looked uneasy. She was evidently uneasy in her mind about something.

"I am afraid that I must ask you to confide in me more fully," Jessie said. "Presently I will ask you to give me a few simple instructions whereby I can keep in touch with my position. But you will recognize the danger, both to you and myself. The countess has her suspicions aroused, as I have told you. Now tell me, did you visit her house to-night? Were you the burglar, so to speak, who——"

"I was. I may as well admit it to you. It was the matter of the papers. You see I knew——"

"Yes, but how did you know?" Jessie persisted. "You saw me this evening quite early. At that time those papers were quite safe at the Foreign Office. How could you tell *then* that they were going to be stolen, or rather, conveyed to Countess Saens? And if you knew that the robbery was going to take place, why did you not warn Lord Merehaven? Or better still, tell Mr. Maxwell what you had discovered?"

"I could not get in touch with Charlie at that moment," Vera said, speaking as if with difficulty. The tears had gathered in her eyes. "There was no time to be lost."

"I am still very much at sea," Jessie said gently. "What aroused your suspicions?"

"Yes, I had better tell you everything," Vera said in a firmer tone. "You have been so good to me, you are so loyal and brave. There never was anybody so good to a stranger before."

"No, no. I did it all for money. It was because I was so desperately placed——"

"It is nothing of the kind, Jessie, and you know it. You would have done the same for me in any case—I feel certain that you would. My first suspicions were aroused by a letter which came into my hands. It was evidently sent in mistake, and written by Charlie to Countess Saens. It seems as if the two had struck up a violent flirtation together. If I cared less than I do for Charlie——"

"I would not let your mind dwell on that," Jessie said soothingly. "When you get to the bottom of this business you will find that there is some plan on the part of that infamous woman. May I ask you whether that letter was an admission of guilt on the part of Mr. Maxwell, or——"

"It might have been. In the light of recent events it certainly looks like it. But pretty well everything is capable of explanation, as you know. I shall possess my soul in patience. . . I am so dazed and confused now that I do not seem able to think clearly. But when I sent for you I could see everything as clear as crystal before my eyes. If I had not met that cab everything would have been all right, and you would have been back at home by this time and nobody any the wiser."

"Then you were quite successful?" Jessie asked eagerly.

"Absolutely successful. I can't think now how I had courage to do it. Once I got going, my nerves never failed me for a moment. You see, I know that house where the countess lives; I have been there so many times before. And I felt so strong and resolute, especially when I passed the porter and he did not make any protest. But the rest you already have from the Countess Saens's maid. It was a sheer piece of bad luck finding her there at all."

"And you got safely out of the house with those papers? That was a bit of good luck indeed."

Vera Galloway smiled. A sudden idea came to her—the idea seemed to come to both girls at the same time. It was Jessie who put the question.

"And where are the papers now?" she asked. "You had better let me have them."

"Have them!" Vera echoed blankly. "Where are they? Don't say they were lost after I fell under the cab!"

There were no papers anywhere to be found.

CHAPTER XX

A SPECIAL EFFORT

COOL hand as he was, even Lechmere glanced with astonishment at the King of Asturia. The ruler was small and mean-looking generally, but now he seemed to be transformed. Varney's drug must have been a powerful one to make that difference. For here was a king—a boy specimen with red hair, but a king all the same. Count Gleikstein flashed a furious glance at Mazaroff, who merely shrugged his shoulders. But he was puzzled and annoyed, as Lechmere could see from the expression of his face. The comedy was a pleasing one for the old queen's messenger.

The great salon was still well filled by Lord Merehaven's guests, for this was one of the functions of the season, and few people were going farther tonight. It was known, too, that the great diva also had captured all hearts and was going to sing again. Therefore the big room, with its magnificent pictures and china and statuary gleaming with hundreds of electric lights, was still filled with a brilliant mass of moving colour.

A thrill and a murmur had run round the brilliant assembly as the King of Asturia came in. There had been many rumours lately, but nobody quite knew the truth. The King of Asturia had either abdicated his throne or he had been deposed by a revolution. The papers had been full of gossip lately, for the Queen of Asturia was a popular figure

in London society, and people were interested. It was for this reason—it was for the sake of necessary people that Lord Merehaven had hoped to have seen his royal guest earlier.

But here he was at last, making a dramatic entrance at exactly the proper time, and surprising even the man who had brought this mischief about.

"The constitution of an ox," Varney told himself. "With a heart like his, too! And yet an hour ago he was looking death in the face. I'll try that drug again."

The king came forward smiling and at his ease. He bowed to the queen, and placed her hand to his lips. Then he extended his fingers to Lord Merehaven.

"My dear lord, I am much distressed to be so late," he said. "I dare say the queen will have told you the reason why I have been delayed. Ah, good evening, Count Gleikstein. Prince Mazaroff, I wonder you are not ashamed to look me in the face."

Mazaroff muttered something and looked uncomfortable. He was understood to ask what he had done.

"Now there is an elastic conscience for you!" the king cried. "That man comes between me and my duty to my people, and then he asks what he has done! He knows that love of pleasure is my stumbling-block, and he plays on my weakness. Only this very afternoon he comes to me with a proposal which I find utterly irresistible. My dear prince, I shall have to forswear your company. You had no right to take me where you took me to-day."

Mazaroff stopped back puzzled and confused. He had decided that he knew his man well, but here

was an utterly unexpected phase of his character.

"You gave me certain papers to sign," the king went on. "Positively, I have utterly forgotten what they were all about. Nothing very important, or I should not have presumed to sign them. Something to do with concessions, were they not?"

"That is so, please your majesty," Mazaroff stammered. "It is a matter that will keep. If you will go over the petition at your leisure? As a liberal-minded man myself——"

"My dear Mazaroff, your liberal-mindedness is proverbial. But as to those papers, I lost them. Positively, they are nowhere to be found. You must let me have others."

A curious clicking sound came from Mazaroff's lips. The face of Count Gleikstein turned pale with anger. There was a comedy going on, and the grave listeners with their polite attention knew what was happening quite as well as if the conversation had been in plain words.

"Your majesty is pleased to jest with me," Mazaroff said hoarsely.

"Indeed I am not, my good fellow. Blame yourself for the excellency of that brand of champagne. We dined somewhere, did we not? I must have changed somewhere after, for I distinctly remember burning a hole in my shirt front with a cigarette, and behold there is no burn there now! Somewhere in the pocket of a dress-coat lies your precious concessions."

"I think," the queen said with some dignity, "we had better change the conversation. I do not approve of those medieval customs in my husband. Ah, Madame Peri is going to sing again."

There was a hush and a stir, and the glorious

liquid notes broke out again. Mazaroff slipped away, followed presently by Count Gleikstein. The latter's face was smiling and gay as he addressed some remark to Mazaroff in a low tone, but his words were bitter.

"You senseless fool," he said. "How have you managed to blunder in this idiotic way? And after everything had been so perfectly arranged. It would have been known to-morrow in every capital in Europe that the Queen of Asturia attended the important diplomatic and social function *alone*. We could have hinted that the king had already fled. In the present state of feeling in Asturia that would have insured the success of the revolution."

"And the occupation of Russia in the interests of peace," Mazaroff sneered. "My dear Gleikstein, I am absolutely dumbfounded. It was as the king says. I lured him into a house where only the fastest of men go, a gambling den. I saw that act of abdication in his pocket. I saw him so helplessly intoxicated that it was any odds he was not seen before morning. I arranged for him to be detained where he was. To-morrow the thing would have been done; it would have been done to-day but he was past signing. Then he comes here clothed and in his right mind. It is amazing. We shall have to begin all over again, it seems to me."

"We certainly have received a check," Gleikstein admitted with a better grace. "But there are other cards to play yet. Those papers missing from the Foreign Office, for instance. To get to the bottom of England's game will be a great advantage."

"Don't you know that we have been beaten there as well?" said Mazaroff.

"You don't mean to say so! Impossible! Why, the

countess sent a cypher message to say that she had been entirely successful. The message was not sent direct to *me*, of course, but it came by a sure hand about eight o'clock. The countess had not read those papers, but they were most assuredly in her possession. She promised me that——"

"Well, she is no longer in a position to fulfil her promise," said Mazaroff. "To return, the papers were most impudently stolen from her house. It is quite true, my dear Gleikstein, that we both realize the powerful secret combination that we have to fight against. Don't you see what a clever lot they are! How they have tracked our deeds and acts! How did they manage to recover the king and bring him here clothed and in his right mind? Why, the thing is nothing less than a miracle. Then the countess loses those papers almost before they are in her possession. It is any odds that she had not even sufficient time to glance at them."

"But you are quite sure that the papers have been lost, Mazaroff?"

"Absolutely certain, though the countess did not tell me so. She left here in a violent hurry on her maid coming to say that there had been a burglary at her house. I heard all that in the hall. The maid said that nothing but papers had vanished. One glance at the face of the countess told me what papers those were. And so we have a powerful combination against us who can work miracles and undo our best efforts almost before the knots are securely tied. For the present we are beaten, and it will be just as well for you to realize it thoroughly."

Gleikstein would have said more, but Lechmere lounged up at the same moment. His grey, lean

face was quite smooth and placid; there was a smile on his face.

"What are you two old friends conspiring about?" he asked."

"There is never any conspiracy so far as diplomacy is concerned," Gleikstein said smoothly. "We are all crystal wells of truth. Who told you we were old friends?"

"My eyes," Lechmere said quite coolly. "And my excellent memory. It is idle to try and deceive an old queen's messenger like me. You look puzzled, both of you. Cast your minds back to 15th November, 1897, at Moscow. It was at the Hotel Petersburg. Three men were playing loo. There was a waiter with one eye in the room. Come, there is a puzzle for you."

And Lechmere lounged on as if anxious to catch up a passing acquaintance.

"What does he mean?" Mazaroff muttered anxiously. "What does the fellow *know*?"

CHAPTER XXI

"FOREWARNED, FOREARMED"

GLEIKSTEIN looked as utterly puzzled as his companion. They glanced at one another in a guilty kind of way. Evidently the allusion to the Hotel Petersburg mentioned by Lechmere conjured up some painful and none too creditable associations.

"There was only one other man present, and he has totally disappeared," said Gleikstein. "Now how did that man come to know all about it? One never seems quite to get away from the past."

Somebody attracted Gleikstein's attention, and Mazaroff wandered off into the garden. He was uneasy and disturbed in his mind, and anxious over the failure of his plot. It seemed as if the whole affair was little better than an open secret. As an agent of Russia, he was anxious to see the abdication of the throne by the King of Asturia. Asturia was a stumbling-block south in the path of Russian progress. Once the king had abdicated or been forced from his throne by a revolution, Russia would certainly step in under the plea of the maintenance of peace in a notoriously turbulent region. They might concede to European opinion by placing a puppet on the throne, but henceforth Asturia would be no better or worse than a Russian province. If this was accomplished, then Mazaroff netted a fortune. Only to-day it had seemed in his grasp.

And with the swiftness of a lightning flash, everything had changed. The puppet had been torn

from Mazaroff's hands; those compromising papers had vanished from Countess Saens's drawer. At the present moment Lord Merehaven was in a position to shrug his shoulders, and say that those suspicions must be verified before he was prepared to admit anything. It was a comedy on both sides, but it remained a comedy so long as those papers were not forthcoming.

Mazaroff was brought back out of the grave of these gloomy reflections by a footman who tendered him a note. There was no answer, the servant said, he had merely had to deliver the letter to Prince Mazaroff. With a new interest in life, Mazaroff recognized the Countess Saens's neat writing. He read the letter slowly and thoughtfully, then tearing it in small pieces he dropped the fragments into the heart of a laurel bush. A slow, cruel smile spread over his dark face.

"So that is the game," he muttered. "Strange that I did not spot it before. Still, the marvellous likeness would have deceived anybody. The maid was not far wrong after all. Well, at any rate, I shall have some sport out of this. Who knows what it may lead to?"

Quite eagerly Mazaroff dropped his cigarette and returned to the house. He walked from one room to the other as if looking for somebody. He was in search of Miss Galloway, he said. Had anybody see her lately? He had an important message to deliver to her from Countess Saens. The cry was taken up—it became generally known that Vera Galloway was sought after.

One had seen her here and one had seen her there, but nobody knew anything definite. The more difficult the search became, the more Prince Mazaroff

appeared to be pleased. The quest came to the ears of Dr. Varney at length. He dropped the ever-pleasant conversation in which he was indulging with a famous lady novelist and became alert instantly.

"I fancy I can find her," he said. "Who seeks her so closely at this time of night?"

"Prince Mazaroff," a girl laughed as she passed by. "Is it a proposal, do you think, doctor? Fancy being proposed to by a real prince!"

But Varney was anxious behind his answering smile. His name had not been mentioned in the business at all. He was quite free to cross-examine Mazaroff without the latter being in the least suspicious. And Varney had a pretty shrewd idea that Mazaroff regarded him as an elderly old fossil who had a child's mind outside the regions of science. He pottered up to the Russian presently.

"What are you seeking?" he asked. "Is there anything that I can do for you?"

"Yes; I am looking for Miss Galloway," Mazaroff said, with a gleam in his eye that told Varney a great deal more than the speaker imagined. "I have an important message for her."

"Well, tell me what it is and I will deliver it," Varney said with a vacuous smile. "As the family physician there are no secrets from me. Who seeks Miss Galloway?"

"Tell her the Countess Saens," Mazaroff said. "I fancy she will understand that. I have just had a letter——"

But Varney had wandered off as if the conversation did not in the least interest him. As a matter of fact, he was both startled and uneasy. Mazaroff had been too communicative in the hour of his

supposed triumph, and he had told Varney everything. Mazaroff had had a letter from the countess, and the countess had guessed, on finding her precious papers missing, exactly what had happened. On making inquiries, Countess Saens had discovered that there was a double of Miss Galloway somewhere, and she had asked Mazaroff to make sure of the fact. And Mazaroff was the very man who was wholly responsible for the appearance of Jessie Harcourt at Merehaven House. But for his flagrant insult of the girl she would not have been here at all. There was danger in the air.

And the danger was not lessened by the fact that Jessie had not returned. People presently would begin to think it strange that Miss Galloway was not to be found. And if those two came face to face—Jessie and Mazaroff—what an explosion there would be!

Well, forewarned was forearmed, Varney told himself as he walked back to the house. Jessie would be back before long, and then the whole thing must come out. But Jessie had done good work, not only on behalf of her new friend Vera Galloway, but also on behalf of England and the peace of Europe. This pretty, resolute, sharp girl had suddenly become an important piece in the great game of diplomatic chess. If necessary, Merehaven must be told everything. He must be shown the absolute importance of checking Mazaroff and rendering his last stroke utterly futile. When Merehaven came to know what had happened, he would be compelled to stand by the side of Jessie Harcourt. It would have to be a strong game of bluff, Varney decided. Merehaven would be properly indignant when the confession came; he would refuse to believe that his niece could

be party to anything of the kind. Jessie could come into the room if Mazaroff decided to make an exposure, and sit with becoming dignity. She would decline to listen to the Russian's preposterous suggestion, and with all the dignity at his command Merehaven would back the girl up. Varney began to chuckle to himself as he thought of Mazaroff's discomfiture.

But whilst Mazaroff was hunting round for the double of Miss Galloway, never dreaming that she also had left the house, Merehaven must be warned. It was a difficult matter to detach the old diplomat from the circle surrounding him, but Varney succeeded at length.

"Now what is the matter?" Merehaven said tartly. "Another surprise? Really, I seem to be living in an atmosphere of them to-night, and I am getting too old for these shocks. What is the matter?"

"A great deal, or I would not bother you in this way?" Varney said. "Make an excuse to get away for a few minutes and go to your study. It is absolutely imperative that I should have a word or two with you before you speak to Mazaroff again."

Merehaven complied with a sigh for his lost social evening. He went off in the direction of his study, but Varney did not follow him direct. On the contrary, he lounged into the garden intending to enter the study by the window, which he knew to be open. By the time he reached the garden he had a full view of Merehaven bending over his writing table as if dispatching a note. At the same instant a figure rose from behind a group of rose trees and confronted Varney. As her black wrap fell away he had no difficulty in recognizing the features of Jessie Harcourt.

"I am back again, you see," she said breathlessly. "It is such wonderful good fortune to meet you here so soon, and where we can speak at once. Dr. Varney, have I missed anything? Is there anything that you have to tell me? Have *I* been missed? Nothing has happened since I left?"

"Not till the last moment," Varney said. "My dear child, positively I can't stay a moment to tell you. It is imperative that I should have a few words with Lord Merehaven at once, before Prince Mazaroff can get to him. Stay here under the shadow of the house; keep your wrap over your head. Nobody is likely to come out again to-night. And please to listen to everything that is going to be said, because the conversation will give you the clue that I cannot stay to afford you now. Ah!"

Varney darted forward until he reached the window of the library, and then he stumbled into the room as if he had found his way there quite by accident. At the same moment Mazaroff entered from the hall. His face was pale, his eyes glittered with something of sneering triumph. He advanced to the writing table and laid a hand on Lord Merehaven's shoulders.

"May I ask your lordship's attention for a moment?" he said. "I have something important and, I am afraid, very painful to say to you."

Jessie strained her ears to listen.

CHAPTER XXII

THE TRAIL GROWS

AS Jessie sat there by the bedside of her new-found friend, she hardly knew what to say. It was impossible, after all that Jessie had seen and heard, to believe that the papers so boldly purloined by Vera Galloway were not of the least importance. Otherwise there would not have been all those alarms and excursions, and most assuredly Countess Saens would have made no attempt to get into the hospital. Vera had handled the missing Foreign Office documents beyond a doubt.

"Cannot you recollect anything about them?" Jessie urged.

"Absolutely nothing at all," Vera replied. "You see, I was so utterly overcome by the success of my daring exploit that I was half dazed. I had saved the situation, and I had saved Charlie Maxwell also. I suppose I must have crossed Piccadilly in a dream. Then there was a violent shock, and I came to my senses; but only for a moment, and then I was utterly unconscious till I arrived here. I had just sense enough left to remember that I was called 'Harcourt,' and there it ended."

"And yet I suppose all your underlinen is marked?" Jessie suggested.

"Only with a monogram, one of those intricate things that nobody could possibly understand. But look round, and see if you can find any trace of those papers. In a vague way I remember clutching them tightly in my hand as the cab struck me."

But there were no papers to be seen. The nurse knew nothing of them, and the hall porter was equally sure that the patient carried nothing as she entered the hospital. Doubtless they had fallen in the road and had been picked up by somebody who would not have the slightest idea of the value of their contents. It was so cruelly hard that the tears rose to Vera's eyes.

"It does seem terrible," she said, "after all the risk and all the danger. I could cry out when I think of it, I could sit up in bed and scream. And to think that those documents are perhaps lying in the gutter at this very moment! Jessie, is there nothing you can do?"

"I can have faith and courage," Jessie replied. "I will ask Dr. Varney what is best to be done. At any rate, there is one way in which we have the better of our foes. They know that the papers are stolen, but they don't know that they have been lost again. I dare say Dr. Varney will think of a plan. But I cannot believe that Mr. Maxwell was guilty. I saw him just now, as I told you, and I am quite certain that he is no traitor to his country."

"I hope not," Vera said. "It seems almost incredible. When Charlie's face rises up before me, I feel that I have been dreaming. Yet I know that he has been exceedingly friendly with the Countess Saens. There was assuredly a kind of flirtation between them. I tried to believe that I was needlessly jealous. I should have thought no more about it until I received that anonymous letter——"

"Anonymous letter!" Jessie exclaimed. "That is the first time that you have mentioned it at all to me."

"Because I forget. As a matter of fact, I had

no opportunity. It was only just before I came to you in my distress and trouble. The letter was beautifully written on very good paper. I am quite sure that it emanated from a lady of education. It simply said that if I would save the man I loved from ruin, I had better contrive to find my way into the Countess Saens's bedroom to-night between the hours of nine and eleven. Also, I was to open the second drawer of the Dutch cabinet, the key of which I should find on the top of the clock. You see, I had heard my uncle mention this Asturian trouble. The queen was a friend of mine, and I divined what was going to happen. I tried to see Charlie, but I was baffled there.

"Then you came into my mind, and I determined to put a desperate resolve into execution. I knew Countess Saens's house well; she took it furnished from some friends of ours, and I had been in every room there. I knew the countess was coming to my aunt's party. And when I started out on my errand I was more or less in the dark until I heard those dreadful newsboys proclaiming the tragedy. Then one or two hints dropped by the Queen of Asturia came back to me, and I knew then the import of my mission. That mission was accomplished, as you know. How I failed at the very last moment you already know."

"But I am not going to admit that you have failed," Jessie urged. "There can be no question of the fact that you dropped those papers. It is equally certain that somebody picked them up. They would be nothing to an outsider, who would probably take them to Scotland Yard. I decline to admit that we are beaten yet."

"It is very good of you to say so," Vera said

gratefully. "You will have to play my part till to-morrow, when Dr Varney must contrive to come and see me. He will have to certify that I am quite well enough to be moved, and then I shall proceed in a cab to your lodgings, still passing as Jessie Harcourt. You will write to your sister and ask her to be prepared. Then you will come home and we will change clothes once more, so that nobody will be any the wiser. Don't worry about anything; be prepared and silent, and leave matters to my maid. And never again so long as I live shall you want a friend, Jessie. God bless you!"

Jessie rose and kissed the tearful face of the speaker. The nurse was hovering about again with a suggestion that it was high time the visitor departed. Jessie blessed the long black wrap and hood that Varney's foresight had provided her with, seeing that she would have to walk home. She would not have been afraid under ordinary circumstances, but the spectacle of a well dressed woman walking in that guise at dead of night was likely to attract attention. As a matter of fact, it did attract attention, for a man passed Jessie at the hospital door.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "It is I—Charles Maxwell. Glad to find that a turned-up collar and hat pulled over the eyes makes so much difference. How is she Miss—Miss——"

Maxwell boggled over the name, and Jessie did not help him. Miss Galloway was going on very well indeed, but she had had her perilous errand for nothing. There was no object whatever in Mr. Maxwell committing a second attack on the house of the countess, seeing that the precious documents had already been abstracted by Vera Galloway.

That Miss Galloway had lost the papers made no difference.

"That's very unfortunate," Maxwell said with a little sigh. "A brave and daring action like that should have been fully rewarded. Still, it gives us breathing time; it enables me to defy the foe. Let me walk back with you as far as the garden gate of Merehaven House. We shall pass the residence of Countess Saens on the way, and we may notice something."

Jessie had no objection to make. On the contrary, she was glad of a male companion. Usually she did not mind being out late; but then she was not dressed for society, and the shoes she wore were not satin ones with old paste buckles.

Very silently they walked along the now deserted streets. Then Maxwell paused, and indicated a house on the opposite side of the road. A brilliant light burned in the hall, and in the dining-room the electrics were fully on. The lace blinds were half down, and beyond the bank of Parma violets and maidenhair fern in the window boxes it was possible to obtain a glimpse into the room.

"The countess is at home," Maxwell whispered. "I know that for certain. I don't fancy she has gone out again, for a messenger boy was summoned to the house. Ah, there she is!"

By stooping a little it was possible to see the figure of the countess. She had discarded her jewels and her flowers; she had a tiny cigarette in her mouth. She took her place at a table and seemed to be writing something. Presently a man entered the room—a slight man, with a pale face and a mass of flame-coloured hair on his head; across his gleaming white shirt an order or two glittered.

Maxwell grasped Jessie's arm; he spoke with a fierce indrawing of his breath.

"Do you see that?" he whispered "Do you recognize anybody in that figure standing there—the man, I mean?"

"The King of Asturia," Jessie replied promptly. It was not possible to be quite certain at that distance, but the dining-room was flooded with light. Beyond doubt here was the ruler of Asturia, whom Jessie had left not so long before in a state of collapse.

"Look at him," Maxwell said in tones of the deepest contempt. "Look at the smiling scoundrel. And yet to save him and his kingdom one of the noblest women in England is risking her all. For his sake General Maxgregor does outrage to his feelings and conceals his passionate love for the queen. I would give ten years of my life to know what is going on there."

It was impossible to hear, however, It was also impossible to see anything from the near side of the road. Jessie's anger was almost as passionate as that of her companion. It seemed a lamentable thing that the King of Asturia should be so lost to all sense of his position. And he must have known that he was making himself quite at home in the house of his deadliest enemy.

CHAPTER XXIII

GENERAL MAXGREGOR

MAXWELL'S coolness had come back to him again. His face was alert and vigorous; his anger had gone.

"I am afraid that I shall have to ask you to go on alone," he said. "In the face of this discovery I do not see my way to lose this opportunity. The king cannot stay here long; you will see that it is impossible for Countess Saens to run any further risks. I am going to wait."

Jessie felt that she would like to wait also, but duty was urging her elsewhere. She stood irresolute just a moment as a figure came down the street, and pausing before the house opposite, whistled a bar from some comic opera. Maxwell touched Jessie's arm.

"Just a minute," he said. "Cling to me as if we were saying good-night. Unless I am greatly mistaken, the whistle was no more than a signal. Ah, that is what I thought! Evidently all the servants have gone to bed, for here is the countess herself."

The countess opened the door and stood on the step with the light behind her. The man stopped whistling and walked up the steps. He saluted the countess properly.

"So you are here at last!" she said. The night was so close and still that her voice was easily carried across the road. "I thought that you were never coming. Take this note and see that Prince

Mazaroff has it without delay. You will be able to give him the signal. See it goes into his own hand. Oh, yes, Merehaven House. The best way will be by the garden door. *You* know where that is."

The man nodded, and said something in Russian that the listeners could not follow. Then he lounged off up the road and the countess vanished. Maxwell was all energy.

"Come along," he said. "I have changed my mind. What the king does for the next few hours must be on his own head and on his own account. It is far greater importance for me to know what message it is that the countess has sent to Prince Mazaroff. We will walk quickly and get ahead of that fellow, so that I can hide myself in the garden before he comes. We shall probably find that the signal is a bar or two of the same opera that our man was whistling just now. Unless fortune plays me a very sorry trick, I shall see the inside of that letter within half an hour."

The slouching figure of the unconscious Russian was passed in a perfectly natural way. Maxwell glanced at him sideways, and saw that he had slipped the letter into his breast pocket. The garden gate leading into the grounds of Merehaven House was safely reached, and Jessie drew a sigh of relief as she threw off her wrap and cast it on a seat. If anybody saw her now it would be assumed that she had come out for a breath of fresh air.

She saw the lights streaming from the library window, she saw the little group there, and she drew nearer. She heard enough to tell her that she was in deadly peril of being discovered. If Mazaroff was not stopped, if he persisted in his determination, the fraud must be exposed.

What was to be done? Something would have to be done, and speedily. Varney could be trusted to stave off the evil moment as long as possible. If she could come and spoil Mazaroff's game? The idea came to Jessie like a flash—she tingled with it.

The queen! Who else but the Queen of Asturia? Jessie raced round and reached the house. She hoped that she would not be too late; she prayed that the queen had not gone. There she was, on the couch of the salon, quiet and dignified as usual, but her dark eyes were alert. She looked about her from time to time as if seeking something. Greatly daring, Jessie made a sign. With her forefinger she actually beckoned to the queen! But there was no sign of offended displeasure in the face of royalty. On the contrary, the queen rose, and making some excuse walked to the door. Once outside her manner changed entirely. Her face grew haggard, her eyes had a hunted expression.

"What is it?" she asked. "Something very wrong, or you would never. . . But never mind that. Speak plainly, and I will do anything I can to assist. Ay, menial work, if necessary."

"There is no necessity, madame," Jessie said breathlessly. "Nor have I time to explain. That will come later. Prince Mazaroff has made what he deems to be a most important discovery. It is nothing like so important as he thinks, but its disclosure at the present moment would ruin all our plans. He is telling Lord Merehaven all about it now in the library. Lord Merehaven is an English gentleman first and a diplomatist afterwards, and he would insist upon having the whole thing cleared up. Could you not make a diversion? Could you not interrupt, get Mazaroff out of the

way if only for half an hour? Time is precious."

"It is very vague," said the queen quietly. "At the same time, I can see that you are in deadly earnest. I will go to the library myself at once."

The queen moved along the corridor swiftly, as she used to do in her mountain home long before she felt the weight of the crown on her brows. She forced a smile to her face as she entered. Lord Merehaven was listening gravely and with a puzzled frown to Mazaroff. Varney stood by laughing with the air of a man who is vastly amused.

"I don't think Lord Merehaven understands," he said. "Champagne, my dear prince, champagne in moderation is an excellent thing. But when indulged in three times a day——"

"I shall be glad if Miss Galloway will be pleased to grace us with her presence," Mazaroff said.

"Would I not do instead?" the queen said as she looked in. She was smiling gaily as she entered. She seemed to have utterly abandoned herself to the gaiety of the moment. "Miss Galloway is doing something for me, and I could not spare her for the next half hour. After that we are both at your disposal. Positively, I cannot permit three of the cleverest and most brilliant men in the house to be seeking each other's society in that selfish manner. You have quite forgotten those stamps, my lord!"

"Bless my soul, so I have!" Merehaven exclaimed. "I beg your majesty's pardon. Mazaroff was saying——"

"What Mazaroff was saying will keep," that individual muttered significantly. "There is no hurry; and the mere idea of keeping her majesty waiting——"

He bowed and smiled. It was quite clear to

Jessie, who was once more outside the window, that the Russian had no idea that anything but accident had postponed his accusation. He was talking to Varney now in the most natural manner. With her hand under his arm the queen had led Merehaven away. Presently Mazaroff made an excuse and followed. Jessie stepped into the room.

"That was a very near thing, my dear," Varney said coolly. "If the queen had not come in——"

"I fetched her," Jessie said. "By great good luck I was by the window at the time. Keep Mazaroff's mouth sealed to-night, and by this time to-morrow, when he is confronted with Vera Galloway, he will see the real Vera and nobody else."

"Then you have been quite successful in your mission?" Varney asked eagerly.

Jessie proceeded to explain, and as she did so Varney's face grew grave. But after all, he reflected, things are not quite so bad as they might be. The enemy was utterly at a loss, and could not possibly know that those papers had vanished.

"You have done wonderfully well between you," Varney said at length. "What was that? I fancied that I saw the shadow of a man lurking in the garden. Just by those mimosa tubs."

Surely enough a shadow flitted along, and somebody began softly whistling a few bars of an opera. Hardly was the first bar on the man's lips before another man dashed forward and struck the whistler to the ground. There was a struggle, the sound of a blow or two, a suggestion of punishment for loafers hanging about there with a felonious intention, and the figure of the first man rose and ran headlong down the garden. In the distance the clang of the wooden door could be heard.

"Another man dashed forward and struck the whistler to the ground."

"We had better see into this," Varney cried. "If this is some cunning game of some gang of thieves——?"

"It is nothing of the kind," Jessie said tranquilly. "That is Mr. Charles Maxwell. We had better go and see if he has succeeded. I will tell you presently what it all means. If he has only obtained possession of that letter without the thief knowing that the robbery was intentional! . . . Come along!"

Varney followed, greatly excited. In the shadow of an alcove seat Maxwell stood with a small black envelope in his hand. He advanced coolly to Varney.

"This was intended for Mazaroff," he explained. "It was sent to him by Countess Saens. I fancy that I have managed this without yonder tool suspecting anything. This young lady will tell you all about it presently. Let us open the letter."

The letter contained nothing worse than a visiting card, with only a few words written on it. As Maxwell held it up to the light the others could see perfectly:—

"I am sending this by a sure hand. The key of the situation lies with General Maxgregor. Follow him up without delay, for time is all against us."

CHAPTER XXIV

AT THE WINDOW

MAXWELL turned over the card thoughtfully and studied the neat handwriting thereon.

"We are dealing with one of the cleverest women in Europe," he said. "See how wonderfully she recovers her mistakes and picks up the tracks again. But I don't see that Maxgregor can have anything to do with it. What do you say, doctor?"

"I should say that Maxgregor had a great deal to do with it," Varney replied. "If he were not a deadly foe to these people here, there would have been no attempt to shoot him as there was to-night. Do you think that he has been tracked back to his lodgings?"

"I should say not," Jessie put in. "I was very careful about that. I told you all about the fair woman in the lane, and the way I prevented her from following the General when he went away in the ill-fitting evening dress of the king. But there might have been spies who——"

"I don't think so," Varney interrupted. "Evidently these people have found out that Maxgregor blocks the way. Depend upon it that the report has gone out to the effect that the king has left here—or so Countess Saens thinks. She calculated that Maxgregor is still here, because the messenger is sent to Mazaroff at the house. If they knew that Maxgregor was lying wounded at his lodgings, they would work at their leisure and there would have been no occasion to send that letter here."

"Which must not miscarry," Maxwell suggested. "If it does they will never think that the whole affair is an accident. My idea is that Mazaroff must have that letter and never imagine for a moment that we have read it. We can see that Maxgregor comes to no harm."

Varney was disposed to regard the suggestion as a good one. But before doing anything he would like to discuss the matter with Lechmere. Maxwell's face fell.

"In that case I will stay here till you have finished," he said. "I don't feel much like facing anybody at present, though I am as innocent of this business as a child."

"What nonsense!" Varney cried. "This is no time to stand on ceremony. Lechmere is a man of the world and a friend of yours. He is not in the least likely to condemn you until the charge is proved. I appreciate your feelings, but an empire is at stake."

Without another word the doctor slipped away and returned presently with Lechmere. He nodded in his cool, collected way at Maxwell as if nothing had happened.

"I have no doubt we shall get to the bottom of this business between us," he said. "Varney has been telling me what has happened. I am quite of your opinion, Maxwell, that Mazaroff must have that letter. When he has read it he shall be watched and followed."

"But how to get it into the fellow's hands without suspicion?" Maxwell asked.

"That is easy enough. I suppose you acted on the spur of the moment, but you were foolish to tear that envelope open without steaming it. For-

tunately the envelope seems to have many counterparts in Lord Merehaven's study, and luckily it is a different texture to the correspondence card on which the message is written. Amongst my many gifts is a fair talent for copying the handwriting of other people. I'll get this fixed up. When the thing is done one of the guests shall hand the letter to Mazaroff and say that he had picked it up in the garden. I think I'll select a lady for the part. Stay here for a moment."

A little later on, and somebody touched Mazaroff's arm as he was watching a game of bridge in the card room. He turned to see a pretty girl standing by and smiling into his face. She held a letter in her hand.

"I fancy this is for you, Prince Mazaroff," she said. "I picked it up in the garden. On the whole, I came very near to having an adventure over it."

Mazaroff glanced at the envelope and his eyes gleamed. Then quite leisurely he tore off the ends and read the message. He smiled in a careless way, as if the message were of no importance.

"I am sorry there was any danger," he said, "especially as the note is so trivial. Where does the adventure come in?"

"You have destroyed my romance," the girl laughed. "I suppose it was the messenger who brought this letter for you, and not a burglar after all. I expect the messenger made a mistake and came into the garden by the door leading from the lane. Anyway, a gardener pounced upon him and the man fled. It was quite thrilling to look at, I assure you. When I had recovered from my fright I saw that letter on the grass. Then the real solution of the mystery burst in upon me."

Mazaroff laughed as if he enjoyed the story. His face grew a little grave.

"I should not tell anybody if I were you," he said. "It isn't many women here who have your pluck. If they know they will fight shy of the garden, and many a promising flirtation will be spoilt. And flirtations very often lead to marriage, you know."

The girl laughed in her turn and flitted away. Lechmere stood by the doorway awaiting her.

"You did it very well," he said. "You are a born actress, Miss Cheylesmere. Oh, yes, the joke develops; you shall play your part in it. Now, I want you to keep an eye upon Mazaroff, and if he leaves the house let me know at once."

Lechmere strolled off, pleased with the way in which events were going, and quite certain that Mazaroff had not the slightest idea what had happened. A pretty scheme was evolving itself in his mind. He went back to the study, where the others were awaiting him.

"So far so good," he said. "Mazaroff has received his letter without guessing what we know of it. At the present moment he is hunting all over the place for Maxgregor, ignorant of the fact that Maxgregor has gone long ago. Mazaroff will ask Lady Merehaven if the General has gone, and she will naturally say no, as the General did not wish her good-night. Mazaroff will be quite certain that Maxgregor would never commit such a social slip, so that I confidently hope that he will continue his hunt."

"But surely there is a much more important thing to do?" Jessie exclaimed. "Mr. Maxwell, have you forgotten whom we saw in the drawing-room with Countess Saens just now?"

"I had forgotten," Maxwell admitted. "Miss—er—Harcourt told me that the King of Asturia was here. She went on to say that he was not only here, but in such a condition that he would have to stay all night and be conveyed home in a cab. Why was he shamming?"

"Shamming!" Varney cried. "I'll stake my professional reputation that the king was not shamming. He has had some near shaves during the time he has been under my care, but never has he been nearer to death's door than he was to-night. I sincerely believe that it was only the administration of a very powerful drug that saved him."

"I know, I know," Jessie cried. "I saw a good deal of it myself. When I left him the king was unconscious. And yet not half an hour ago I saw him in the Countess Saens's dining-room."

Varney and Lechmere smiled incredibly. They both shook their heads.

"Impossible!" the former said. "Quite impossible, my dear young lady. For the last hour, or nearly an hour, the King of Asturia has been in this house clothed and in his right mind. It was I who brought him downstairs. It was I who produced his majesty to the utter confusion of Mazaroff and Gleikstein, the Russian *chargé d'affaires*. You must have been utterly mistaken."

"It was no mistake," Maxwell put in. "I have seen the king often enough here and elsewhere. I am prepared to swear in any court of justice that within the last half hour I have seen the King of Asturia in close companionship with Countess Saens in her own house."

Varney and Lechmere looked a little bewildered. There still appeared to be cards in the game of

which they knew nothing. Varney was about to speak when Lechmere touched his arm and indicated two figures that had just entered the study.

"To prove that you two are mistaken," he said, "look there. If you know the King of Asturia so well, perhaps you will tell me who that is?"

"The king," Maxwell cried. "And the queen. And yet I am ready to swear. . . You don't think that he might have slipped out and——"

"No, I don't," Lechmere said curtly. "As a matter of fact, his majesty is being too carefully watched for that. He has been here all the time, I assure you."

"It's like a dream," Jessie said. "The king is in two places at once. And seeing that *that* is the king, who was the man we saw in Countess Saens's dining-room?"

CHAPTER XXV

AN UNEXPECTED HONOUR

THE question was asked a great deal easier than it could be answered. Only Lechmere smiled.

"I fancy I could give a pretty shrewd guess," he said. "The countess has been inspired by a discovery that she has made to-night, and a double of the king might prove very useful under certain circumstances. And in spite of what this young lady says as to the way she baffled the hired spy in the lane, I fancy the countess has an inkling of the truth. We have pretty well established the fact that the king started out this afternoon with certain papers in his pocket."

"Probably an abdication of his throne in the interests of Russia," Maxwell said.

"Precisely. He was hesitating as to whether he should sign or not. He goes to some gambling hell and gets exceedingly intoxicated there. The idea was probably to force a signature out of him as soon as he was in a fit state to hold a pen. Then a vast amount of money would have changed hands. The king would have been invited to drink again, and perhaps have recovered without having the least idea where he was for the next few days. In a word, he would have disappeared. In four and twenty hours all Europe would have heard of the abdication. Now, where are those papers now? The king certainly had them in his possession when he was rescued from the gambling hell."

"I wish you had looked," Maxwell said. "If I had known this earlier!"

"Unfortunately, nobody knew of it," Lechmere proceeded. "Only our enemies. And when Maxgregor went off from here in the king's dress clothes, he took the papers in the pockets. If Madame Saens has an idea of what has happened, she knows this. Hence her note to Mazaroff. As a matter of fact, our friend the General is in considerable peril."

"In which case somebody ought to go to him at once," Jessie exclaimed.

Lechmere announced his intention of doing so without delay, but Maxwell objected. It would be far better for Lechmere to stay here and keep an eye on Mazaroff. And Maxwell was supposed to be out of the way, nobody would give him a second thought; therefore he was the best man for the purpose. Varney was warmly in favour of this suggestion, and Lechmere had no further objection to offer.

"Let it go at that," he said. "And the sooner you are off the better. There is one great point in our favour, these people can do nothing very harmful so long as those papers are missing. I mean the Foreign Office papers stolen from Countess Saens's bedroom. If we could get them back——"

"They must be got back," Varney said. "The best I can do is to go down to Scotland Yard and report the loss without being too free over the contents of the documents. Once those are back in our hands, our people can afford to be blandly ignorant of what the *Mercury* said to-night."

"And I should be free to hold up my head again." Maxwell murmured. "But I am wasting time here."

Maxwell disappeared into the darkness and made

his way by the back lane into Piccadilly. The streets were quiet now, and very few people about. It was no far cry to the chambers occupied by General Maxgregor, and no time would be lost by going to the house of Countess Saens. Maxwell paused before it a moment. The dining-room blinds were still up, and the lights gleaming inside. But so far as Maxwell could see the room was empty. He lingered as long as he dared in the hope of something happening. He was just turning away when the front door opened and a man came out. In the passing flash of the street lamp Maxwell recognized the man who he had mistaken for the King of Asturia. The likeness became no less strong under Maxwell's close scrutiny.

The man stopped on the doorstep and lit a cigarette, and then he pulled his hat over his eyes and turned up his coat collar, warm as the night was. A hansom crawled along with the driver half asleep on his perch. In a strong German accent the man on the pavement called to the driver.

"Fleet Street!" he said. "No 191B, Fleet Street! Office of the *Evening Mercury*, you know. Wake up!"

Maxwell felt half inclined to follow. But he thought of the possible danger to Maxgregor, and he was forced unwillingly to abandon his intention. Acting on the impulse of the moment, he ran up the steps of the house and tried the door. To his surprise the lock turned in his hand. At the same moment the blinds in the dining-room were pulled down by the countess herself, and the lights switched off. Maxwell stood with the door just opened; he saw the figure of the countess herself mounting up the stairs. He could hear distinctly the

swish of her skirts. Then there was another click, and the hall lights vanished. Countess Saens was going to bed, having forgotten to lock the front door! That all the servants had gone to bed Maxwell felt certain, for the area quarters were all in black darkness.

"Astonishing how careless these clever women are sometimes!" Maxwell muttered as he took his way down the road. "I suppose the servants generally see to that, and her ladyship has entirely forgotten a thing that never comes within the scope of her duties."

Maxgregor's place was reached at length, and Maxwell was glad to see the lights burning. A sleepy porter had not the slightest idea whether the General was in or out. He was just going to bed himself; he never sat up after midnight, and if the gentlemen were out after this without their keys it was their own fault. Maxwell cut short this tirade by going upstairs. He walked straight into Maxgregor's sitting-room. It was a dark room on the first floor with folding doors. On the other side of the folding doors the General was stretched out on the bed. He looked somewhat haughtily at the intruder.

"This is an unexpected honour," he said. "I have met you once or twice, Mr. Maxwell, but that does not give you the right to come into my bedroom in this fashion. In the light of recent events——"

"For Heaven's sake don't take that tone!" Maxwell cried passionately. "It is impossible not to understand what you are alluding to. And it is quite futile just now to protest my innocence. That I am innocent; that sooner or later you will have to apologize for your suspicions is inevitable. Mean-

while, I am here at the request of Mr. Lechmere and Dr. Varney to warn you of your danger. Cleverly as your escape was managed, it has been found out. Let me tell you what has happened ? "

The General bowed coldly. He looked on the speaker as the cause of all the trouble. He was not going to accept a mere protestation of innocence in this way. And yet there was a ring of sincerity in what Maxwell said. He was here, also, of his own free will, and his news was serious.

" So that accursed woman has hit the right nail again," he growled. " That letter you speak of means mischief to me. I wonder if the countess knows that I am wounded? I dare say she does. I might have been murdered in my bed if you had not come."

" You would have been murdered," Maxwell retorted. " That is absolutely certain. Are you very ill ? "

" No ; it was merely a flesh wound in the shoulder. The bullet has been extracted. I lost blood, and I am feeling rather weak at present, but in a day or two I shall be quite myself again."

" How did you manage to keep the thing so quiet ? "

" I sent for a doctor friend of mine. He was with me in the first Asturian campaign—a fellow who has a fortune, and loves doctoring as a pastime. He knows a lot about the Balkan business. I asked him to keep this matter a secret, and he has done so. Is there anything else I can tell you ? "

" It seems to me that there is a good deal that you can tell me," Maxwell replied. " When you walked off with the king's clothes you probably went away with papers that may be used with great effect

against Russia if they fall into proper hands—our hands, that is. If you don't mind, I shall be glad to turn out the pockets of that coat."

"That is an excellent idea," Maxgregor said. "What did I do?—oh, I know. The porter took the whole suit down to be brushed; as I don't keep a man he acts as my valet. If you would not mind going down into the hall and asking the fellow?"

Maxwell vanished at once. But the hall porter had departed for the night, so the occupant of another set of chambers said as he opened the outer door with his latchkey. At the same moment a figure bolted past the door, a figure with coat collar turned up and hat pulled down. It was the double of the King of Asturia. Maxgregor's face grew stern as he heard.

"Let us anticipate events," he said. "Put out the lights in my sitting-room and close the door. When you have done that put out the light here also. There is a way into the corridor out of this room without going through the sitting-room. Place the key of the sitting-room door on the outside."

Maxwell crept back presently, having accomplished his task. For half an hour or more the two sat in the pitch darkness saying not a word to each other. It seemed a long time, but the watchers knew that something was going to happen and stifled their impatience. Presently Maxwell felt that a hand was clutching him by the arm. Maxgregor was whispering something in his ear.

And under the folding doors a long slit of light filtered into the bedroom. Somebody had turned up the light in the sitting-room!

CHAPTER XXVI

LOYAL SILENCE

IT was getting late by this time. Gradually the guests were thinning and the splendid rooms were taking on a deserted appearance. Jessie sat in one of the corridors hidden away behind a bank of palms and azaleas, and longed for the time when she could rest. From head to foot she was aching with fatigue. She had not been used to excitement lately; the close atmosphere of the Bond Street establishment and the want of regular exercise in the pure air had told upon her. Now that the excitement had passed away she realized how tired she was.

She laid her head back against the wall and closed her eyes. So utterly exhausted was she that she did not seem to care what happened. And there would be much to be done in the morning. If only Vera Galloway could be restored to her proper place, Jessie vowed that nothing should prevail upon her to carry on the adventure. She slept just for a moment. She might have stayed there till daylight, only Ronald Hope came along and found her.

At the sound of a human voice Jessie became quite alert and vigorous again.

"How you startled me," she said. "I was asleep. Is there anything fresh, any new complication?"

Ronald dropped into the seat by Jessie's side. He was looking just a little grave and stern. It was possible to detain Jessie there for some little time.

"There is nothing fresh," he said. "I have a few words to say to you, Jessie. Everybody is going, and only a few of Lady Merehaven's intimate friends remain."

"If you are one of them you will not be expected to leave just yet," Jessie smiled. "But why look so serious, Ronald? Have I done anything?"

"Upon my word, I don't know," Ronald said in some perplexity. "I don't like it, Jess. If you look at it from a proper point of view you have no business to be here at all. Lady Merehaven is a dear friend of mine. What would she say if she knew everything? As a matter of fact, she is bound to know everything sooner or later."

"But you can't blame me," Jessie protested. "Look at my position. I was quite desperate. I had been dismissed from Bond Street for no fault of my own; I had a sister practically depending upon upon me; it was useless in the circumstances to try and find employment elsewhere. I was face to face with something very like starvation, my dear Ronald."

Ronald's face softened, but the perplexed frown on his face was still there.

"Oh, I know it," he said eagerly. "I see your position entirely. At the same time, it is quite wrong. I am looking at the social side of the question. And the worst of the affair is that you *must* go on now till Vera Galloway comes back. I have been trying to find some way to achieve that without delay. If it can be managed, you must promise never to change your identity again."

Something like tears rose into Jessie's eyes. The dull, tired feeling was coming over her again.

"Don't blame me, dear," she whispered. "Think

of my position. I had not met you this afternoon; I did not dream that you still cared for me. And yet I fancy that I would have done the same in any case. A good and noble girl comes to me in great trouble; she asks me to help her out of a grave difficulty to save one she loves. To help her I do this. And she has more or less succeeded. Between the two of us we have gone far to save a nation. Tell Lady Merehaven if you like, but do not spoil everything in the moment of victory."

"I don't want to," Ronald said. "It would be ridiculous to speak just yet. But any moment some unexpected accident may find you out. It may come before bedtime. And what would happen to you then? I am very jealous for the good name of my future wife. Dr. Varney——"

"Dr. Varney is standing by me nobly, and he will see that I am safe," Jessie said. "Dear old boy, don't be afraid. Trust me a little longer, and I am quite sure——"

"My darling, I trust you implicitly," Ronald exclaimed. He bent forward and kissed Jessie's trembling lips. "Only I am so miserably anxious, so fearful lest—— But somebody is coming."

Somebody came down the corridor, pushing the azaleas carelessly aside from time to time. The newcomer was evidently looking for somebody. Then the grey face of Lechmere appeared, white and excited as Ronald had never seen him before. He paused before the others.

"Miss—er—Galloway, I have been looking for you everywhere," he said. "It is of the utmost importance that——"

"Oh, dear!" said Jessie with a little broken laugh. "Please don't tell me that I have to do anything else

"Then the gray face of Lechmere appeared white and excited."

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to-night. I am utterly worn out. If I could go straight to bed——"

"So you may as far as I am concerned," Lechmere said curtly. "I beg your pardon, but I fancy I have made a discovery of importance. That man whom you took to be the King of Asturia—I mean the man you saw in the Countess Saens's dining-room. What became of him?"

"Really, I cannot tell you," Jessie said. "Let me think. I fancy Mr. Maxwell said something about him. Yes, that was it. He said that the man you mention drove to the office of the *Mercury*. Mr. Maxwell would have followed him, only he could not spare the time."

Lechmere nodded as if pleased about something, but the stern look was still on his face.

"I fancy that is all that I need bother you about at present," he said. "And I don't think that we shall need your services any more to-night, my dear young lady. If you can contrive to see Dr. Varney on your ride before breakfast in the morning, you will be doing everybody a service."

Lechmere darted away as hurriedly as he had come. Evidently he had work of importance before him.

"He has given me one useful piece of information," Jessie said as soon as Lechmere had gone. "If what he remarks is correct, Miss Galloway is in the habit of riding before breakfast. Well, I shall be able to fulfil that part of the programme, Ronald. It will be delightful to be on the back of a horse again, even in a borrowed habit, which I sincerely hope will fit me."

Ronald looked at the mass of chiffon and the quivering fall of drapery before him and smiled.

The dress might have been made for the wearer, so perfectly did it seem to fit her.

"This is quite another matter," Jessie said. "One can do wonders with a little lace and a bow or two of chiffon. But a close-fitting riding habit is quite another thing. I dare say I shall manage. There is only one thing that really fills me with terror."

"I should like to know what that is," said Ronald.

"Why, Countess Saens. I am quite sure that she knows what has taken place—at least, she suspects, and will find out dual identity, or she would never have tried to gain admission to the hospital to-night. I am perfectly sure that she will make another attempt in the morning. She is clever and unscrupulous, and she is certain to get her own way. In the accident ward of a hospital there is always a case or two that needs identity, and there will be the chance of the countess. She professes to have missed somebody, and she will be able to walk through the accident ward. That is all she requires. And I am quite certain that she will do this thing in the course of the morning. Don't you agree with me?"

Ronald was fain to agree with what Jessie said. Perhaps some scheme for baffling the countess was already in the air, as Lechmere would not have suggested that early morning visit to Varney.

"I have been thinking the matter out," Jessie went on. "Why could not Miss Galloway be removed to a private ward? If Dr. Varney called at the hospital he could see the patient and drop a hint to that effect. You see what is uppermost in my mind, Ronald. A private ward affords chance of escape, also chance for me to take Miss Galloway's place and let her come home."

"You are a friend in need," Ronald said as he kissed the red lips again. "It was a lucky thing for Vera Galloway when she thought of you. But there are risks even in this scheme. Suppose the maid who was present when the robbery at the countess Saens's took place comes forward and identifies you, what then? You will be charged with burglary, and perhaps convicted. The police will find out all about you—your name will figure largely in the newspapers."

Jessie hesitated a little before she replied. Her head fell forward, and she fell almost asleep on Ronald's arm. Nothing seemed to matter to her now; if only she could have a good night's rest.

"I don't seem to care," she murmured. "I don't fancy that the countess would go that far. It isn't as if she stood any chance of recovering the stolen papers. And she would have to give a description of the missing documents, which would not suit her book at all. On the whole, I am prepared to take any risk so that I can spare Vera Galloway further misery."

And Ronald had nothing further to say. It was good to know that he had the love of a girl like this. She should carry out her resolution, and he would maintain a loyal silence for the present.

CHAPTER XXVII

LECHMERE TO THE RESCUE

WITH a new object uppermost in his mind Lechmere left Merehaven House and took his way into Piccadilly. The roads were almost deserted now, save for a solitary foot-passenger and a dingy night cab. One of these crept along presently, and Lechmere ordered the driver to take him to Fleet Street. In contrast with the West End there was bustle and animation enough in the street that never sleeps. It was near to the hour when the great morning papers went to press; there were lights everywhere, and the hoarse rattle of machinery. Lechmere came at length to the offices of the *Mercury* and demanded to see the editor. The request was an unusual one at so late an hour, and the clerk asked if the visitor had an appointment.

"I have no appointment at all," Lechmere said. "But at the same time I am going to see the editor. Give my card to Mr. Hunt, and say that I will not detain him many moments."

There was something in Lechmere's manner that caused the clerk to take the card without further protest. Lechmere had before now forced himself in times of emergency on the great ones of the earth, so that he was not going to be baffled by a newspaper editor, important functionary as the latter was. He waited some little time before the clerk returned.

Mr. Hunt was very busy, he said, and was sorry he could not see the gentleman. Perhaps he would like to call later on, or send up the nature of his business? Some very important news had come in late, and in the circumstances it was impossible for the editor to grant an interview to anybody.

Lechmere said he would call again, and turned for the door. But he had no intention of being put off in this way. He paused as a rush of business distracted the attention of the clerk. In a corridor leading to a flight of steps two jaded-looking reporters were talking eagerly.

"Is it a fake or a real thing?" the first one said. "I've just come back from Westminster—scene in the House, don't you know—and Gregg would not even look at us. Said we had a real good thing on."

"Then you didn't get to the bottom of what it was?" the other asked eagerly.

"No, I didn't. Something about the King of somewhere and a row in the office. Anyway, the whole of the staff up in the composing-room are working with closed doors, so that no hated rival shall get a sniff of what is going on. We are evidently in for a big sensation."

Lechmere waited for no more; he gripped his opportunity with both hands. He advanced along the corridor to where the two men were talking, and asked what floor Mr. Hunt's office was on. The two men looked at him with something of admiration on their faces. Hunt was a martinet in his office, and difficult of access at all times.

"Second floor on the right," one of the reporters said with a wink at his companion. "Don't knock, but walk right in. Hunt is always glad to see visitors at this hour. It is a refreshing change after the grind

of the night. He'll be quite pleased to see you."

Lechmere grimly expressed his thanks, though the sarcastic force of the words and the wink were not lost on him. He was here to see Hunt, and he was going to do it at any cost. He made his way up the staircase and along to the second floor, where a door with the name of Hunt in large letters attracted his eye. The door of the room was shut, but Lechmere walked in.

The room was empty for the moment. The floor was littered with paper and proofs; on the desk a slip of galley proof lay. The heading attracted Lechmere's attention, and he whistled. Then he sat calmly down to await Mr. Hunt's return. He had no undue trial of his patience, for a moment later the editor of the *Mercury* bustled into the room.

There was a pleased smile on his face; he seemed to be on the best of terms with himself. But the smile faded away, and the mean, eager face grew anxious as Hunt detected the presence of his visitor.

"Now this is really too bad, Mr. Lechmere," he protested. Lechmere did not fail to notice the agitation of the speaker's voice. "Of course, I had your card. I sent a message down for you. If you had been the king I would not have seen you to-night. I never see anybody after twelve o'clock. I repeat, if you had been the king I should have had to refuse you an audience."

"Sounds exceedingly impressive, not to say regal," Lechmere remarked in a dry tone, and without the slightest suggestion of an apology. "What king do you happen to mean?"

"Why, the King of England, of course," Hunt puffed. "Any living king, as a matter of fact."

"Any king in the *Almanach de Gotha*—with the exception of the King of Asturia, eh?"

The question was couched in a tone of easy badinage, but its effect on Hunt was wonderful. The face grew grey and his hands trembled. If he had been accused of some crime he could not have looked more agitated. He tried to bluff, but he could only stammer something incoherent.

"Really, I don't know what you mean," he said. "The King of Asturia, you say?"

"My words were quite plain, Mr. Hunt. I came here to-night determined to see you and determined not to be bluffed by all the clerks in your office. Your paper has gone to press, and therefore you must have a few minutes to spare. You need not be afraid. Your composing-room door is locked, and the present item of news destined for your readers is not likely to leak out. Will you be so good as to let me have an advanced copy of the paper?"

"Certainly not," Hunt said. "This is an outrage. If you do not leave my office——"

"Sit down," Lechmere said sternly. He might have been speaking to an unruly hound. "You are not going beyond that door without we have an explanation. The King of Asturia was here to-night. If you deny it, I shall give you the lie from that printed proof on the table before you."

Hunt glanced at the long galley slip and wriggled. All his dignity had vanished.

"I am not going to deny it," he said. "The King of Asturia has been here. He came in a cab. I did not send for him, he came of his own free will. He gave me certain information——"

"I have not the slightest doubt of it," Lechmere said drily. "Unfortunately, his majesty has made for himself in London the sort of reputation which is coveted only by a certain class of music-hall

frequenter and the haunter of the typical Strand bar. There have been occasions when his majesty has exceeded the bounds in the way of intoxicating liquor. Did you see any signs of it to-night?"

Hunt intimated that he had. He was palpably uneasy and uncomfortable. Every admission that he made Lechmere had literally to drag from him.

"The description sounds convincing," Lechmere said. "But suppose I was in a position to tell you that the King of Asturia had not been here in Fleet Street at all?"

"Impossible!" Hunt cried. "I saw his majesty; he sat in that chair for an hour. A man in my position is not likely to make mistakes like that. And he gave me certain information that I propose to make a sensation of. What that information is you will know with the rest of the general public when you get your *Mercury* at breakfast time."

Lechmere nodded. Beyond the door he could see something in the guise of a foreman printer with a damp news sheet in his hand. He knew at once that here was an early copy of the paper; that early copy he had made up his mind to possess. He rose as if satisfied with his interview.

"Very well," he said. "I will wish you good-night. You have done a foolish thing, and, unless I am greatly mistaken, you are the victim of one of the most mistaken cases of identity every played off on the editor of a great newspaper. But the fault is on your own head. Good-night."

Lechmere passed out, closing the door behind him. The printer stood there, evidently waiting for him to go. Lechmere silently drew his purse from his pocket and extracted a ten-pound note. This he held up in the glaring light of the passage and

pointed to the paper. The printer perspired profusely. Then, with a sudden spasmodic gesture he folded up the paper and placed it in Lechmere's hand, at the same time snatching convulsively for the money. The whole transaction did not take five seconds.

Calm and easy in his triumph, Lechmere walked leisurely down the stairs. Once in Fleet Street he stood under the friendly light of a lamp and opened the paper. As he did so he started. Well in hand as he usually kept himself, Lechmere was surprised to-night.

There it was for anybody to see who had an eye at all; the fifth page was filled with it :—

"The King of Asturia and his people. His majesty visits the *Mercury* office and speaks freely. Does not care for the responsibilities of State, and has made up his mind fo abdicate. Has already signed the declaration to that effect. Prefers Piccadilly to the Balkan service. One of the most amazing romances in the history of Europe."

"Good Heavens!" Lechmere cried. "So that is the game! What a lucky thing I came down here! Of all the audacious things that ever happened, this is the most audacious of all."

He crushed the paper in his hand and hurried breathlessly westward at the top of his speed.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE POWER OF THE PRESS

THE editorial staff of the *Mercury* had certainly done their work very well. No detail had been spared to make the report absolutely complete. Everybody was reminded that recently there had been a great deal of friction in that corner of the Balkans known as Asturia. It was well known that for many years Russia had coveted that fair province. Up to now the crown of the King of Asturia had been quite safe. But with the advent of the present monarch things were entirely different. King Erno had very early in his career given evidence that he did not appreciate the full measure of responsibility. He was too fond of gaiety and pleasure; he had no patriotism. His people were a stern, hard-living race, and they did not tolerate the gaiety of the new court.

The queen was all very well, but she was only the consort, after all. It was useless for her to be ever on the spot whilst the king was dissipating his fortune and spending the money ground from his people by extra taxation in London and Paris. And latterly eyes had been turned to Vienna, where dwelt Prince Alix, who was known to covet the throne. At any moment there might be a glaring tragedy, and Prince Alix might find himself with the crown. That Prince Alix was notoriously a friend of Russia mattered little at the present juncture.

Lechmere read all this as he hurried along Fleet Street. He also read a lot of information that was true, and more that was false. Evidently the *Mercury* people cared for nothing beyond the sensation of the hour. But after all this came the sting of the thing. The King of Asturia had that night gone down to the *Mercury* office and demanded audience of the editor. He had been very wild and violent, and the intimation that he was hopelessly intoxicated was not very carefully concealed. The king wished it to be understood that he had done with Asturia. He had not the slightest intention of going back to his capital any more. His abdication was signed, and doubtless by that time a deputation was on its way to Vienna to offer the throne to Prince Alix. Altogether, it was perhaps the most sensational report that ever appeared even in an American paper. It was certain to create a great commotion, and set all the courts of Europe by the ears.

"Well, of all the amazing audacity!" Lechmere muttered at he raced along. "Nothing more daring had ever been done in the history of political intrigue. I wonder if Hunt suspects the truth. Not that it would make any difference to him so long as he could shift the responsibility afterwards, as I daresay he will be prepared with proofs that he was justified in what he did. There is only one way to get even with this thing."

Lechmere arrived at length at the office of the *Daily Herald*. The paper in question had very little taint of the modern spirit about it. There was no chance, for instance, that it would ever be published for less than a penny. The *Herald* had no very great reputation for enterprise, but it was

sound and safe, and everything therein would be accepted as true. No newspaper in the kingdom carried more weight, no journal had a greater reputation for veracity.

The *Herald* had not gone to press yet. There was no great hurry, seeing that the feverish rush to capture circulation had never commended itself to the paper's proprietors. There was a sense of decorum about the office that had been lacking in the *entourage* of the *Mercury*. The place seemed more dignified; there was no noise; all the corridors had felted floors. Even down in the manager's office the same decorum prevailed.

Lechmere knew that he would have no difficulty in seeing the editor of the *Herald*. In the first place, that gentleman was an old friend of his; indeed, Lechmere had contributed from time to time many articles on foreign politics. Mr. Eveleigh was at liberty, and would see Mr. Lechmere at once. The editor was lying back in an armchair smoking a cigar.

"I have just finished, my dear fellow," he said. "I hope you have something good for me? Nothing wrong? You look actually excited, a most unusual thing for you."

"I certainly have come along at a pretty good pace," Lechmere admitted. "A most extraordinary thing has happened. If this matter is allowed to pass there is no limit to the damage that it may do. Will you be so good as to cast your eye on that, Eveleigh?"

The editor of the *Herald* took the *Mercury* is his hand as if he had been contaminated. There was a smile of contempt on his fine face. But the smile faded away, and an interested gleam came into his

eyes as he read. He tossed the paper aside at length.

"Nothing very wonderful," he said. "That is precisely how I should have expected the present ruler of Asturia to behave. It's a fine scoop for Hunt, and one after his own heart. He would set the whole of Europe in a blaze to sell an extra fifty thousand papers."

"Why not? He is an American, and his aim is to make money. He has the excuse that he is not bound by any patriotic scruples. Do you believe that story?"

"It certainly has the impress of truth," Eveleigh said thoughtfully. "Hunt dare not hoax his public. The average Briton would never stand it. Besides, that's Hunt's own writing. He is perfectly certain to have taken the statement down from the royal lips."

"No doubt. Probably with the aid of a stenographer. There are no flies on Hunt, to use a pet expression of his own. Let us assume for the sake of argument that Hunt fully believes that he has had the thing from the principal actor in the drama. But all the same, he didn't. The man who dictated that statement was no more King of Asturia than I am."

Eveleigh looked up brightly. Lechmere was not in the habit of making statements that he couldn't prove.

"As a matter of fact, the king has been at Lord Merehaven's all the evening," he went on. "I left him there a little while ago. This thing has been deliberately got up by the gang of conspirators who are working here in the interests of Russia and incidentally for their own pockets. When the proper time comes I will name all these conspirators to you.

I can even give you the name of the man who played the part for Hunt's benefit. They chose their people carefully, knowing that only the *Mercury* out of all the London journals would publish that without first consulting the Foreign Secretary. Don't you see the game? Every paper in Paris and Vienna and St. Petersburg will get a copy of that interview *in extenso*. It will create a perfect furore in Asturia if the lie is not most promptly contradicted. You see what I mean?"

"In the first place, that some clever actor has been playing the king?" Eveleigh asked.

"Yes. It was Countess Saens's idea in the first place. I am afraid that some of our people inspired her with the suggestion. But that is neither here nor there. That lie has to be scotched, and you are the man to do it. After all said and done, *the* journalistic English authority abroad is the *Herald*. Therefore the *Herald* is going to print that wild story of Hunt's to-night and comment upon the audacity of the scheme. Also, you are going to proclaim the fact that the real King of Asturia was known to be at the residence of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Merehaven, at the time when he was supposed to be betraying his private affairs to the editor of the *Mercury*. If I were not absolutely certain of my facts I would not ask you to do this, Eveleigh. I want you to make a big thing of this. I want you to assume that Hunt has been hoaxed, and call for the prompt punishment of the criminals. Is there time?"

"Oh, there is plenty of time," Eveleigh said thoughtfully. "No trouble on that score. And I think I can manage it. Sit down for a minute or two while I go and see my chief of staff."

Lechmere sat down fluttering over the pages of the *Mercury*. His restless eye wandered near the column and along the crowded advertisements. Finally his gaze stopped at the agony column. One line there arrested his attention. It was a jumbled cypher, but the training that Lechmere had had in that kind of thing enabled him to read it almost at a glance.

"I thought so," he said. "I felt absolutely certain of my man. So Peretori is in London! I might have guessed that from the first. Well, it seems to me that I am in a position to hoist these people with their own petard. So long as Peretori is not in earnest, well and good. I wonder if there is a telephone anywhere here?"

There was a telephone at the back of the editor's desk, and Lechmere promptly called up Scotland Yard in search of information. After a pause the information came, which Lechmere carefully jotted down in his pocket book. Eveleigh came back with the air of a busy man.

"I'm going to do it, Lechmere," he said. "No thanks needed: it will be a good thing for us. And now I shall be glad if you will go, as I shall be pretty busy for the next hour. I think you will be safe to leave matters in my hands."

CHAPTER XXIX

IN MAXGREGOR'S CHAMBERS

WHILST Lechmere was making the best of his way from the *Herald* office to the chambers in the big block occupied by General Maxgregor, he, it will be remembered, lay perfectly still on his bed watching the light broadening under the door of his sitting-room. It was a thrilling moment for both Maxwell and himself.

"What are you going to do?" Maxwell whispered. "Shall I go and see what the fellow is after?"

"No," Maxgregor replied. "Stay where you are. Unless I am greatly mistaken, I know who it is. Our friend is coming in here to investigate."

Surely enough the double doors were opening and the figure walked in. He came boldly enough with the light behind him into the comparative darkness of the bedroom. He fumbled along the wall for the switch, and presently the bedroom also was flooded with light. Mazaroff stood there, his hands apparently covered with pitch, for they were black and sticky, and he was looking round for the washstand.

"If there is anything you want and you don't see it," Maxgregor said coolly "ring the bell."

Mazaroff gave a startled cry. The man was genuinely astonished, of that there could be no doubt. He looked helplessly from Maxgregor to Maxwell and back again.

"I am exceedingly sorry," he stammered. "I —I have come to the wrong rooms."

"Where did you get the key of my suite from?" Maxgregor demanded.

"Who from?" Mazaroff asked helplessly. "Why, from Barlow— Barlow who occupies the suite that I took for this one. You see, Barlow is a friend of mine. Very unfortunate that the key should fit both outer rooms."

"Very," Maxgregor said drily. "When was it that Barlow gave you the key?"

"Yesterday, or the day before?" Mazaroff explained. "You see, he is away from London. As a matter of fact he wanted to let the suite, and I wanted it for a friend. It's very strange that I should find you here like this. I can only tender you my very sincere apologies."

"Better wash your hands before you go," Maxwell suggested grimly. "Were you looking for the basin?"

"That is it," Mazaroff said hurriedly. "You see, I thought I knew my way about the suite, having been so often in Barlow's rooms. I—I slipped getting out of a cab just now and fell on a newly finished piece of asphalte pavement. May I use your basin?"

Maxgregor grimly intimated that the basin was at the disposal of the intruder, who did not cease to pour out floods of apologies. Mazaroff was pretty much at his ease again by this time. He was quite concerned to see Maxgregor looking so pale. Was he suffering from that old malarial fever again?

"Sprained ankle," Maxgregor said sketchily. "Nothing very much to speak of. As a matter of fact, I have never been in better health in my life. It seems to me——"

Maxgregor paused and broke off with a quick

sneeze. The thing was ostensibly done, and served very well to hide an exclamation of surprise. For in the sitting-room, with his finger to his lips, Lechmere stood. He shook his head warningly, and pointed to Mazaroff. Then he crossed the room and took his place behind the heavy curtain before the window. No sooner was he secure of his hiding place than he walked out and signified Maxwell to approach the window.

In a casual way Maxwell sauntered into the sitting-room. He first moved the curtain, and appeared to be looking idly into the street below.

"Good boy!" Lechmere whispered approvingly. "What is that fellow doing here? Said he came here in mistake, for a suite of rooms occupied by a man named Barlow? Didn't come here to murder Maxgregor as you might have been inclined to imagine. Well, I quite agree that Mazaroff has made a mistake and shall be able to prove to you why a little later on. I want you to shut the bedroom door for a time till I give you the signal—a tap of the blind on the window—and keep Mazaroff talking. Make him feel at his ease, if possible. Big events are in the air."

Maxwell sauntered back to the bedroom and pulled the door to behind him. Mazaroff was quite himself again by this time, and stood chatting gaily to Maxgregor. It was no part of the latter's policy to let Mazaroff know that he had been nearly done to death at Merehaven House.

"How did you come by that sprained ankle?" he asked. "You seemed all right just an hour or so ago, when I saw you at Merehaven House."

"That's where I did it," Maxgregor lied coolly. He had no scruples whatever in dealing with a man

like Mazaroff. "Slipped on a confounded banana skin, which, by the way, is a little more dangerous than orange peel. It's a nuisance just at present, when I am so busy with Asturian affairs and the king is such a handful to hold. I daresay some confounded Russian placed that banana skin for me."

"Don't forget that Prince Mazaroff is a Russian," Maxwell laughed.

"Oh, you need not trouble about me," Mazaroff said in his most fascinating manner. "There are Russians and Russians. I am too enlightened and progressive to feel comfortable in my own country, and that is why I spend so much time in England. So far as I am concerned, you have all my sympathy in your efforts to check the Russian influence in the Balkans. What was that?"

From the sitting-room beyond there came the sounds of somebody gently whistling. The thing was natural enough, and yet Mazaroff listened with a certain suggestion of uneasiness. It came to Maxwell, quick as a flash, that here was something that Mazaroff must not see, for a moment at any rate. Lechmere had charged him distinctly to keep Mazaroff talking for a time.

"My man, I expect," he explained. "I told him to come here about this time, and I suppose he is whistling to let me know that he is handy. When anybody is in trouble, as I am at present, it behoves one to be careful. As one accused of betraying diplomatic secrets——"

"Not at all, my dear fellow," Mazaroff said graciously. "Pray do not apologise. There is a great deal too much fuss made over that kind of thing. The sale of diplomatic secrets is a brisk one in my

own country, or how would so many of our poor aristocracy live? And you are innocent, of course. The mere fact that Lancing has made away with himself proves that."

Maxwell turned away so that the speaker should not see his face. It was hard work to keep his hands off the ruffian who was one of the main causes of the trouble. Perhaps Maxgregor divined that, for he hastened to change the conversation. Meanwhile, the whistling in the next room went on. . . . . .

Lechmere carelessly pulled a section of the curtrin aside and looked out. He saw a little man with a clean-shaven face and shrewd eye sitting swinging his legs on the edge of the table and whistling very softly to himself. The little man seemed to be quite at home; he was perfectly cool and collected, save that his face was shining with something that looked like an intense perspiration. He had a small bag with him of which he seemed to be very careful. If he was satisfied with himself, Lechmere grinned with the air of a man who is still more satisfied.

As a matter of fact, Lechmere had discovered all that he desired for the present. He swayed the knot of the blind cord backwards and forwards gently, as if the draught from the open windows was moving it. The knot tapped idly on the panes, and Maxwell's keen ear heard it. The time had come to get rid of Mazaroff. Maxwell opened the door leading into the corridor.

"Excuse me if I ask you to go," he said. "I have some business to settle with Maxgregor, and I have to be on my way to Dover within an hour. It is not very polite of me, but——"

And Maxwell shrugged his shoulders. Mazaroff departed with a graceful apology. He passed along the corridor till he came to the open sitting-room door. He looked in and grabbed for the shoulders of the little man who sat whistling on the table.

"You fool!" he said. "If you only knew how near you have been to betraying everything! But I am to blame as I mistook the room, perhaps because the door was open. Come along at once."

The little man murmured something to the effect that he was ready to do anything for a quiet life, and obediently followed Mazaroff. Lechmere crept from the shadow of the curtain and closed the outer door of the sitting-room. Then he called for Maxwell, who came immediately.

"Is there anything fresh?" he demanded eagerly. "Is there anything that I can do for you?"

"Yes," Lechmere said crisply. "You can do a great deal for me, and you need ask no questions for the present, for I have no time to reply to them. Ask Maxgregor if he has any of his fishing tackle here. If he has, ask him to let me have a long length of salmon line on a reel. The sooner I have it the better I shall be pleased."

"In the bottom drawer of my writing table," Maxgregor called out. "What *are* you up to now?"

CHAPTER XXX

HER FRIEND, THE QUEEN

JESSIE sat listening in a vague way to a girl who sat chatting by her side. She had not the least idea what the girl was saying, nor, indeed, had she any clue to the identity of the speaker. The talk was a little confidential, and was evidently the continuation of some confidence began at another time. Jessie nodded and smiled, and by instinct looked sympathetic at the right moment.

"And what would you say to Reggie under the circumstances?" the girl asked. "It isn't as if George had behaved badly, because he really hasn't, you know. Vera, you are not listening."

Jessie laughed in a dreamy kind of way. The whole thing was getting horribly on her nerves now. She felt how utterly impossible it would be to keep up much longer. She was utterly tired out; she longed for something to inspire her flagging strength. She began to understand why men drink in certain circumstances. But she was just equal to the occasion.

"I am dead tired, I am half asleep," she said. "And my head is racking. Ask me again, my dear, when I am capable of a coherent thought or two. And as to Reggie, why, what can you do better than trust your own woman's instinct. Have I not always thought that——"

But there was no reason for Jessie to prevaricate any further. Relieved at last from her onerous

duties, Lady Merehaven was crossing the room. There was no chance of escape so far as Jessie could see, the guests had dwindled down to a comfortable number including the Queen of Asturia. She would have to wait so long as the king chose to play bridge; it would be folly to leave him there. Lady Merehaven came and dropped into a seat by Jessie's side.

"My dear Ada, money is bid for you," she said to the confidential girl. "Your father is positively fussing for you in the hall. He said something about an early excursion on the river to-morrow."

The girl rose with a pleasant little laugh and kissed Jessie. Evidently there was some very clever friend of Vera Galloway's. As she flitted away Lady Merehaven turned to Jessie.

"I have heard the most extraordinary idea suggested to-night," she said. "I understand from your uncle that the idea emanated from Prince Mazaroff. He said that you were not yourself, but somebody else. It sounds very Irish, you know, but there it is. My dear child, how pale you are. Short-sighted as I am, I can see how pale you are."

"I have a dreadful headache," Jessie said unsteadily. "What did the prince mean?"

"Really, I have no idea. I could see that he was very annoyed about something. He told some queer story to the effect that there was a girl in a Bond Street shop who was the very image of you. The only distant branch of our family whose women are remarkably like ours are the Harcourts. But I understand that they have disappeared altogether. It is just possible, of course, that one of the girls might have come down to service in a shop. Have you heard anything of this?"

"I have been told so," Jessie said boldly.

"Ronald Hope told me. But why should you trouble?"

"My dear, this is rather a serious business. You heard what happened to Countess Saens. You heard what the countess's maid said. There is no doubt that this girl, who is so very like you, actually committed that robbery. I am going to ask your uncle to enquire into the matter. We shall have the police arresting you for a swindler or something of that kind."

Jessie suppressed a tendency to burst into hysterical laughter. It was fortunate for her that somebody called Lady Merehaven away at this moment, or Jessie's laughter had turned to tears. She crept away through the little room where the bridge players were deep in their game into the conservatory beyond. The king was still playing, and behind his chair was a dark, military looking man with a stern face. It was quite evident that he was on guard over the royal presence. Jessie's mood changed when once she found herself alone. She felt sad and desolate and lonely and utterly beyond her strength. She placed her aching head between her hands and the tears ran down her cheeks.

For a time she wept there quietly. Her eyes were still misty with tears when the noise of rustling skirts attracted her attention. She wiped her face hurriedly, but it was too late to take away all traces of emotion. And as the tears were brushed from the long lashes, Jessie saw the queen before her.

The queen was smiling graciously, but the smile turned to a look of concern. She sat down by the girl's side and slipped an arm round her neck. It was one of the soft, womanly touches that endeared the queen to all who knew her. She was all a woman now.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "I have seen too much trouble in my life not to feel for it in others. And you are so brave and firm as a rule. Let me help you; forget who I am. Let me be as good a friend to you as you have been to me, Vera."

The last word touched Jessie. It seemed horrible to play a part with such a woman as this. And yet the night would have been a bad one for Asturia without the guardian girl from Bond Street. Jessie felt a strong inclination to tell the truth.

"I had better not say, perhaps," she said. "And yet you can help me. There is one thing that I dread—and that is to stay to-night under this roof. Pray don't ask me why, the secret is not all my own. I feel that I *dare* not stay."

The queen asked no curious questions; there was a phase of temperament here that puzzled her. Very softly she took Jessie's hand in hers and stroked it.

"I know that nervous restlessness," she said. "Who better? But then with me every shadow hides an enemy. Even my friends are enemies sometimes. So you dread staying here to-night. Why?"

"I cannot tell you. madame." Jessie said in a low voice. "And yet if we were elsewhere I might be tempted to speak the truth. Again, I must be out very early in the morning. If you could help me——"

"Help you! Of course I can help you! What is the use of being a queen if I cannot do a little thing like that? One of my women has fallen ill, and I am rather awkwardly situated. If you will come with me to-night you shall take her place. How would that suit you?"

Jessie gasped with pleasure. The whole burden of her trouble seemed to have fallen from her

shoulders. She rose to her feet as if anxious to escape at once. A new colour came into her face. The queen smiled, and pulled the girl down into her seat again.

"You are as impetuous and headstrong as you are courageous," she said. "I cannot go yet. There is something still to be done. A message has to be sent to Captain Alexis, the gentleman who you can see from here standing behind the king's chair. It is his duty not to allow his majesty out of his sight. But you need not fear. I shall make everything right with Lady Merehaven."

"If you only knew what a relief it is to me!" Jessie murmured. "I dared not stay here to-night. I should have betrayed everything. And after being so wonderfully successful so far——"

Jessie paused, conscious that she was saying too much. The queen regarded her with astonishment. A look of haughtiness—pride, something like suspicion, too, crossed her handsome, weary face.

"Evidently there is more here than meets the eye," she said coldly. "I have pledged my word, and I am not going to break it now. Possibly you may have a story to tell me presently."

"I will tell you everything if you will only be kind to me," Jessie exclaimed. "Ah, madame, if you only knew what I had gone through and suffered for you to-night——"

"True," the queen said hastily and with a change of tone. "I had forgotten for the moment. Only I hate mysteries. My life has been poisoned by them for years. Stay here and compose yourself, and I will see Lady Merehaven. Then I will send for your maid and give her instructions what to do. Don't stir from here."

Jessie murmured her thanks. She was only too glad to remain where she was and get a little time to think. At any rate, she was free from the dread of having to pass a night at Merehaven House. It was all very well for her to pose as Vera Galloway when dressed for the part and under the shaded lights. But in the strong light of day in her simple night clothing, and with her hair free, it would be a miracle if Vera Galloway's maid did not detect the difference.

Jessie lay back and closed her eyes with a blissful sense of freedom from danger. Surely it would make no difference if she told the queen everything? After all, she had done as much for Asturia as Vera had done, and perhaps more. She had proved her courage and her devotion, and no girl could have done more. Just for a moment Jessie fell into a quiet doze.

She was awakened at length by the entry of a servant, who came with the information that the carriage of the Queen of Asturia was at the door, that her majesty desired to see Miss Galloway. There was a new life and strength in Jessie as she rose to obey the summons.

"Say I am coming at once," she said. "Her majesty is in the hall, I suppose?"

CHAPTER XXXI

A SURPRISE FOR JESSIE

HER majesty was in the hall as Jessie had anticipated. She was chatting quite gaily with Lady Merehaven as the girl came up. She flashed Jessie a significant glance.

"Your aunt has been pleased to accede to my whim," she said. "And so you are coming with me, Vera. I understand your maid is sending everything to our hotel. Good-night, Lady Merehaven, and please do not allow those people to play cards too long. My dear child, come along."

"It is a very great honour for the child," Lady Merehaven murmured. "Good-night, madame, good-night."

The queen swept Jessie into the brougham before her. There was a tiny electric lamp behind the queen's head so that it shone full on Jessie's face. Jessie felt the latter's eyes going all over her.

"Now tell me your story," she said. "Tell me freely and don't be afraid. I shall be your good friend."

"You give me courage to proceed," Jessie murmured. "In the first place I'll tell you why I so dreaded passing the night at Merehaven House. I should certainly have been found out in the morning and then everything would have been ruined. Not that I cared for myself, but for the sake of others. Madame, is it possible that you fail to see that I am not Miss Galloway at all?"

The queen fairly gasped with astonishment. Those dark eyes of hers took in Jessie's identity. It was a long time before she spoke again.

"You are quite right," she said slowly and thoughtfully. "I notice little subtle differences now you mention it. And yet the likeness is wonderful. My dear, you are a lady."

"I am a lady, yes. My father was Colonel Harcourt, in fact I am a connection of the Merehavens. There has been nothing vulgar about my adventure to-night."

"That I am absolutely certain of. Really, the likeness is marvellous. And I have been talking to you and confiding in you all the evening as if you were my friend Vera Galloway."

"Instead of your friend Jessie Harcourt," the girl said with a wistful smile. "Believe me, I am as devoted to your interests as is the one whose part I play. I have given proof of it enough to-night. I might have gone on deceiving you to the end but I could not do it."

"I see, I see. You are telling the truth, you are making me love you. And why did you do this for one who a little time ago was a perfect stranger to you? If you know anything of our cause——"

"But I do now—and you can command me in any way. Perhaps I had better begin at the beginning. It was Vera Galloway who took me up. She came to me at a moment when I was absolutely desperate. It is strange how the warp of fate has dragged me into this business!"

"You cannot tell how deeply I am interested," the queen said softly.

"It is very good of your majesty. Miss Galloway came to me. She had heard of me, evidently.

She came to me at the very moment when I was dismissed from my situation. I had been accused of a disgraceful flirtation with the son of one of the shop customers. As a matter of fact the coward had tried to kiss me and he let all the blame rest on my shoulders. I was dismissed without any chance of a further situation, I had only a few shillings in the world and an invalid sister partially dependent upon me. At that moment I was desperate enough for anything. Quite early the complication began. The name of the coward who brought all this trouble on me was Prince Boris Mazaroff."

"I am not surprised," the queen said with just a touch of weary scorn in her voice. "We are all creatures of fate. I know that I am. But the coincidence is a little strange."

"Miss Galloway wrote me a letter and asked me to call upon her in my working dress. When I saw her I could not but be struck by the amazing likeness between us. Then she unfolded her plan—the plan that we were to change places for a little time. Someone whom she cared for was in trouble and it was impossible that she should get away without being suspected. Your Majesty may guess that the somebody in trouble was no other than Mr. Charles Maxwell and at the bottom of the trouble was the missing papers relating to Asturia."

The queen nodded, her dark eyes gleaming in the light of the lamp.

"I see," she exclaimed. "Those papers that found their way into the hands of the Countess Saens. The papers that she was robbed of almost as soon as she had obtained possession of them. What an amazing daring thing to do. I seem to see quite clearly now. Miss Galloway slipped off and stole

them while all the time her friends and relations thought that she was in the house of her uncle! Ah, what will not a woman do for the sake of the man she loves! And she was quite successful!"

"Quite. We know that by the scene made by the countess' maid at Merehaven House. I did not guess until the maid looked at me and said that I was the thief. Of course everybody who heard it laughed, but the woman stuck to her story. The statement was a flood of light to me, when I heard it I knew then exactlv what had happened as well as if I had been present and seen the robbery."

"Vera Galloway saved Asturia and her lover at the same time," the queen said. "But why did not Miss Galloway come back and resume her proper place?"

"Oh, that is the unfortunate part of it," Jessie said sadly. "She was so overcome with her good fortune that she walked down Piccadilly in a dazed state. Then she was run over by a cab and taken to Charing Cross Hospital. She is there at this moment."

A cry of passionate anger broke from the queen. Her hands were clasped together closely.

"Of all the misfortunes!" she gasped. "Will nothing ever come right here? Go on and tell me the worst."

"The worst is that Vera lost the papers," Jessie resumed. "When the news of the accident came to me, I slipped out and with great risk went to the hospital. Dr. Varney gave me a permit. Vera had lost the papers, she had not the least idea what had become of them. But that is not all. Countess Saens has found out that a girl answering to my description had been taken to the hospital and she

went there. Fortunately she was refused admission. But she will get this in the morning and that is why I want to go out so early. The suspicions of the countess are aroused, she begins to understand. And there is Prince Mazaroff."

"What can he possibly have to do with it?" the Queen asked.

"Your Majesty is forgetting that Prince Mazaroff knows both Vera Galloway and Jessie Harcourt, the shop girl whom he honoured with his hated attentions. He knows that there is a girl in London identical in looks to Miss Galloway, he heard what Countess Saens's maid said. Indeed he went so far to-night to hint to Lord Merehaven that a trick was being played upon her ladyship. There is only one thing that prevented his discovery outright."

"And what was that?" the queen asked. "Why should he hesitate?"

"Because he was not absolutely sure of his ground," Jessie said. "He knew the shop girl Jessie Harcourt. But he was puzzled because he did not imagine that a shop girl would be so wonderfully at ease in good society and have all the manners of it at her fingers' ends. He did not know that the Bond Street girl was of gentle birth, and he was puzzled. Do you see my point?"

The queen saw the point perfectly well and admitted that it was a very clever one.

"I am more than glad that you have told me all this," she said in a thrilling voice. "Your frankness may save the situation in the long run. One thing is certain, we must get Vera out of the hospital and back again here without delay. And for the time being you must disappear. I seem to have as many enemies here as I have in Asturia, only they

are cleverer ones. These people are all in the pay of Russia. Countess Saens must be baffled at any cost. Wait a moment."

The carriage had pulled up, but the footman did not dismount from the box. So far as Jessie could judge, the carriage had stopped nowhere near the Queen of Asturia's headquarters. She smiled as Jessie looked up with a questioning eye.

"You are wondering why we are here," she said. "It is imperative before I sleep to-night that I should have a few words with General Maxgregor. I understand that he has a suite of rooms in the big block of flats. I fancy those are his windows on the second floor, those with the lights up. Somebody has just come in and looked out of the window. My child, who is that?"

The queen's voice changed suddenly, her tones were harsh and rasping. A man in evening dress stood in one of the lighted windows looking out.

"You saw what happened at Lady Merehaven's," the queen went on. "We left the king there with the faithful Alexis behind his chair. We have come direct here. The whole thing is maddening. Who do you reckon that man to be who was looking out of the window?"

Jessie looked up with bewildered eyes. The old dreamy feeling was coming over her again. She gazed steadily at the figure framed in the flood of light.

"There is no mistake about it," she gasped. "That is his majesty the King of Asturia!"

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CHAPTER XXXII

NO TIME TO LOSE

LECHMERE would have walked off with his fishing line, but Maxgregor called him back. There was no reason for mystery over this business so far as the General could see. But Lechmere shook his head.

"I'll be back in a very few minutes," he said, "and then you can tell me what has happened. On the other hand I shall have a great deal to tell you. Which way did Mazaroff go?"

So far as Maxwell could judge, Marazoff had not left the building. He was pretty sure that the Russian had not come to Maxgregor with any sinister design. Beyond question, Mazaroff was looking for a certain suite of rooms, though Maxgregor doubted it.

"The fellow would have shewn his teeth fast enough it it had not been for Maxwell," he said. "It is possible that he is looking for a certain suite of rooms, I should not be at all surprised to find that he has not yet left the building."

Lechmere muttered something to the effect that he was absolutely certain of it. He was very anxious to know if there was a back staircase from the floor and whether it was much used so late at night.

"It isn't used at all after the servants have gone," Maxgregor explained. "There are several very rapid young men living on this floor and they find the back staircase useful for the purpose of evading

creditors. The stairs are at the far end of the corridor."

Lechmere murmured his thanks and hurried away. He had hardly disappeared before there was a tiny tap on the door and Jessie came in. She seemed anxious and uneasy, nor was her confusion lessened by the expression of blank astonishment, not to say displeasure, on Maxwell's face.

"Vera," he cried reproachfully. "Oh, I forgot. Events are moving so fast that it is difficult to keep pace with them. And you are so wonderfully like Vera Galloway. I had to be told the facts, you see. Oh, of course you told me yourself by the hospital. But what are you doing here?"

"I came with the queen," Jessie explained. "I am going to her hotel with her. But the queen declared that she could not rest to-night unless she had seen General Maxgregor. Is he better?"

"I am going on as well as possible," Maxgregor said from his bed. "It is dreadful to be laid up just now, at this time of all others. It was good of the queen to think of me, but it occurs to me to be dreadfully imprudent for her to come here now."

"But she had to," Jessie persisted. "There was no help for it. And another extraordinary thing happened. We left the king at Merehaven House being closely guarded by Captain Alexis. When we came away his majesty was actually playing bridge. And yet, as the carriage pulled up outside these mansions, we saw the king seated in one of the windows."

"Impossible," Maxgregor cried. "The king has not been here at all."

"So I should have said if I had been able to disbelieve my own eyes," Jessie went on. "I

tell you I have just seen the king. At first I thought that he was actually here. Now I know that he must be on the next suite to this. He was in evening dress just as we left him, but he had his orders on. And the queen is in a position to confirm what I say."

"I am certainly in a position to do what Miss ——er——this lady says," came a voice from the doorway as the queen came in. "We must get to the bottom of this."

Maxgregor groaned. He admired the pluck and spirit of the queen but he deplored the audacity that brought her here. The thing was absolutely madness. The queen smiled anxiously.

"Are you any worse, my dear old friend," she asked. "Are you suffering at all?"

"My pain is more mental than physical," Maxgregor replied. "Oh, why did you come here, why did you not leave matters to me? Heaven only knows how many spies are dogging your footsteps. And it is impossible that the king can be where you say he is."

"The king's recuperative powers are marvellous," Maxwell remarked. "At one hour he is apparently at the point of death, an hour later he is an honoured guest of the Foreign Secretary. A little time later this young lady and I see him seated in the drawing-room of Countess Saens's house and quite at his ease there. At this moment he seems to be in two places at once. Can anybody explain. Can *you*?"

The last question was put to Lechmere, who had stepped into the room again. The diplomatist smiled.

"I hope to explain the whole thing and prove what has happened before long," he said. "It

was to aid you in that purpose that I borrowed the salmon line. Is your majesty safe here?"

"Is my majesty safe anywhere?" the queen asked in bitter contempt. "I have taken every precaution. There was nobody to be seen as I drove up and I have sent my horses to wait for me in the square. Then I could not stop any longer, I could not wait for my dear little friend here to bring me news. And I was most miserably anxious about General Maxgregor. Is there any news?"

"I was just coming to the news," Lechmere said. "Our enemies have tried on the most dangerous and daring thing that I have ever heard of. When the *Mercury* appears to-morrow it will contain a long and particular account of an interview between the King of Asturia and the Editor. I have seen the Editor of the *Mercury*, and by a strategem I became possessed of an advanced copy of the paper. I should should like your majesty to see what it is that the British public will find on their breakfast tables later on."

Lechmere produced his copy of the *Mercury* and flattened it on the table. Then he handed it to the queen. She waved the sheet aside impatiently, she could not read to-night, her eyes were too heavy.

"Let us have the pith of it," she said. "I am curious to know what it all means."

Lechmere proceeded to read the article aloud. It was well done and the insinuations it conveyed were worse than the actual truth. For instance, it was not boldly said that the King of Asturia had visited the offices of the *Mercury* in a state of intoxication, but it was shrewdly inferred. The brutal callous indifference of the whole thing was most

strongly marked. The king had abdicated his throne, he cared nothing for his country or what his subjects thought of it. Here was an article calculated to arouse the greatest sensation in Europe. The queen was not slow to see the danger of it.

"But the thing is all a lie," she cried. "It is impossible. We know that the king has not left Merehaven House since dinner-time. And this interview is stated to have taken place later. Is this what your journalism is coming to in this country, Mr. Lechmere?"

"Not our journalism, madame," Lechmere said coolly. "No English daily paper would have been so depraved and unpatriotic as to print that interview without consulting some Minister of State. As a matter of fact the *Mercury* is American, it is published to sell, it is the pioneer paper floated to capture the cream of our Press. Hunt has no scruples."

"But he has invented the whole thing," the queen said. "It is a dastardly fraud."

"No," Lechmere said calmly. "No doubt somebody called on Hunt and told him that story. I believe Hunt to be genuinely under the impression that he had the honour of the confidence of the King of Asturia. In a way he has been hoaxed with the rest."

"If we could only prove it," the queen said under her breath. "If we could only prove it."

"I hope to be able to do so within the next half hour," Lechmere went on in his cool way. "I have a pretty shrewd idea what has taken place. In a measure we have to thank the little scheme planned out between this young lady here and her double, Miss Vera Galloway. It suggested an idea

to Countess Saens. And fortunately for her the material was at hand. After all said and done the Editor of the *Mercury* could only have seen the king in the most casual way and he would be easily imposed on. In the circumstances, he would be quite ready and even eager to be imposed upon. The fact that the whole affair subsequently proved to be a hoax would not in the least disturb Hunt. He would get his sensation and his extra copies sold, the mistake itself would be forgotten in a day or two."

"But not in Europe," the queen cried. "By to-morrow Europe will be ringing with that vile lie. The telegraph will be put in motion, our enemies will see that it is promptly reported from one end of Asturia to another. Once the lie is floated on the stream of public opinion we shall never catch it up again. The whole thing has been engineered with the deliberate intention of ruining us. What can we do?"

"What man can do I have already done," Lechmere said. "The thing will be contradicted and proved to be a lie by the *Herald* newspaper, to whose Editor I have told everything. The two papers will start fairly, the one with the lie and the other with the truth. And as you know the *Herald* is looked upon as a respectable journal. The telegraph that flashes the news for the one will flash the refutation for the other. And I have taken an extremely bold step. The *Herald* to-morrow will be responsible for the announcement that so far from resigning his crown, King Erno of Asturia has started already by a series of special trains to Asturia. Madame, you will see that this is done?"

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE FISH ON THE LINE

A GLEAM of admiration flashed into the eyes of the queen. Here was a man after her own heart. And Lechmere had done marvellously well. True, he could not stamp out the lie, he could not prevent the thing being reported from one end of Europe to another, but he could refute it. The mere fact that King Erno had started for Asturia would naturally create a great impression.

"It shall be done," the queen cried. "I will go back to Merehaven House and fetch the king. He shall travel without delay under the care of Captain Alexis. I would that I had another trusty friend to accompany him, but it seems to me that I need you all in London.

"You do not need me, madame," said Maxwell earnestly. "I mean you don't need me *here*. For the moment the good friends you have here will suffice. It is necessary that I should be out of the way for a time, and nobody would guess where I have gone. Let me go to Asturia."

The queen thanked Maxwell with a look of gratitude from her dark eyes. Then she turned to Lechmere. "How can all this travelling machinery be put in motion so quickly?" she asked.

"Fortunately you have come to the right quarter for information," Lechmere said. "As an old queen's messenger, there are few services for getting over the ground that I do not know. Before now

I have been despatched at a minute's notice to the other end of Europe with instructions to reach my destination in a given time. In an hour or so, the programme will be complete. I will see to the special train to Dover and the special steamer to cross the Channel. After that it is a mere matter of using the cables. If the king does not care to undertake the journey——"

The queen laughed in a strange metallic fashion. Her eyes were gleaming with intensity of purpose.

"The king is going," she said between her teeth. "You may be quite sure about that. If he declines, or shews the least infirmity of purpose, he will be drugged and taken home that way. He will shew himself in the capital. A manifesto will be issued directly he gets there. There is one thing yet to be done."

The queen paused and looked significantly at Lechmere. He smiled and shook his head.

"I know exactly what your majesty means," he said. "It is useless for us to take all this trouble if we are to be confronted with a mystery which will enable certain people to say that the King of Asturia is still in London. I have taken a step to entirely obviate that business. If your majesty has a few minutes to spare I shall be able to render your mind easy on that score."

The queen expressed her willingness to stay, and Lechmere left the room. He paused to light a cigar in the corridor and don his overcoat again. Then he walked casually to the outer door of the next suite of rooms and strolled calmly in. The second door of the suite was locked and Lechmere gently tried the handle.

"So far so good," he muttered. "There is

another door into the corridor leading to the back stairs. I need not worry about the back stairs as my ferret is there. If the thing were not so serious, what a fine comedy it would make! Now for it!"

Lechmere tapped smartly on the door, a murmur of voices within ceased and the door was opened and shewed the face of Prince Mazaroff himself. He turned a little pale as he saw Lechmere and stammeringly asked what the latter wanted. Lechmere laughed in an irritating kind of way.

"Well, that's pretty cool," he said. "I come to the suite of rooms of my friend Bevis to smoke a cigar and I find you here demanding why I come. Is Bevis here?"

"No, he isn't," Mazaroff said curtly as he came into the front room and closed the door behind him. "And, what is more, he is not likely to be in. I have a friend in there if you must know."

Mazaroff grinned with an assumption that Lechmere could understand that the situation was rather a delicate one. But Lechmere knew better than that for the voice in the inner room had been unmistakably that of a man. But it served the purpose of the old diplomat to let the thing pass.

"Very well," he said. "I will take your word for it. But where is my friend Bevis?"

"I haven't the remotest idea where your friend Bevis is or where he has got to," Mazaroff said with a sneer in his voice. "Bevis is a young man who has lately outrun the constable. He inferred to me that he was going to retire to the country for a time. He offered me this little place on my own terms and I am to give it back to our friend if I get tired of it. It is a more swagger *pied à terre*

than my own and I jumped at the chance. Now you know everything."

Lechmere nodded as if perfectly satisfied, though he did not know everything by any means. He sat down and helped himself to a cigarette to Mazaroff's annoyance. But Lechmere appeared not to see it. He had his own game to play and he was not to be deterred.

"I want to have a little chat with you," he said. "We shall never get a better chance than this. I want if possible to enlist your sympathies on the side of the Queen of Asturia. If I could gain your assistance and that of Madame Saens I should be more than satisfied."

Mazaroff muttered something to the effect that he should be delighted. But his aspect was uneasy and guilty. He could not shake off his air of fear. From time to time he cocked his ears as if listening for something in the inner room. Lechmere sat there grimly smoking and looking at the ceiling. He was not quite sure what card he should play next.

"I am thinking of going to Asturia myself," he said. "I'm not quite old enough to get rusty yet. And there is a fine field for intrigue and adventure yonder. I understand that the king returns to-morrow. It will be in all the papers in the morning."

"The deuce it will!" Mazaroff exclaimed blankly, "Why that will upset all our plans——I mean. that it will be a checkmate to Russia. Considering all that we have done . . . is that a fact, Lechmere?"

"My dear chap, surely I have no object in telling you what is false!" Lechmere said. "Of course

it is a fact. The king ought never to have come away, he would not have come away if the queen could have trusted him. She thought that she could do her country good by visiting London. But the king will be looked after much better in future, I promise you. Have you seen Peretori lately ? "

The latter question was shot dexterously at Mazaroff like a snap from a gun. The latter glanced swiftly at Lechmere, but he could make nothing of the other's inscrutable face. The Russian began to feel as if he had blundered into a trap ; he had the same fear as a lying witness in the box under the horror of a rasping cross-examination from a sharp barrister.

" I don't know that I am acquainted with the man you mention ? " he faltered.

" Oh, nonsense. Take your memory back, man. Not know Peretori ! Think of that night five years ago in Paris when you and I and Scandel and the rest were supping with those Oderon people. And you say that the name of Peretori is not known to you ! "

Mazaroff laughed in a sulky kind of way. He said something to the effect that his memory was not as good as it might be. From time to time he glanced at the inner door of the suite, he seemed as if he could not keep his eyes off it.

" Do you think that you could find his address for me ? " Lechmere persisted. " I have every reason to believe that he is somewhere in London at the present moment. Ah, look there. To think of it ! And you pretending all this when the very man in question is in the next room. What a coincidence ! "

"Call me a liar at once," Mazaroff said thickly "How dare you insinuate that I am not—not——"

"Telling the truth," Lechmere said coolly. "That stick yonder belongs to Peretori. Nobody else possesses one like it, as I have heard Peretori boast. If you can deny what I say after—but I shall make no apologies for seeing into the matter for myself."

With a sudden dart Lechmere was by the door leading into the inner room. Mazaroff started after him crying out something in Russian at the top of his voice. But he was too late to prevent Lechmere from entering the inner room. The place was quite empty now save for a hat and a pair of gloves on the table, both of which tended to prove that the room had been occupied a few moments before.

"This is a most unpardonable outrage," Mazaroff cried. He had quite recovered himself within the last minute or two, he was his cunning self again. "I did not ask you to come here at all. And as to the evidence of that stick it is worth nothing. I could get a copy of it made that—but after what has happened I think you had better give me the benefit of your absence."

"Quite so," Lechmere said pleasantly," I apologise. I'll go out this way, I think. Awfully sorry to have ruffled you so much. Good-night."

Lechmere departed into the corridor by the far door, which he closed swiftly behind him. As he did so there came a sound of stumbling and falling from the region of the back stairs and curses in a ruffled voice that had a note of pain in it.

"Got him," Lechmere said triumphantly. "I was certain of my man. Now for it!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

A ROYAL ACTOR

LECHMERE darted along in the direction of the secondary staircase from whence the noise of the falling body had come. It was somewhat dark there, for the gas jet at that point had been turned down and there were no electrics there. At the foot of the stairs could be seen the outline of somebody who had become entangled with a maze of salmon line and who was held up like a great blundering bee in a spider's web. Lechmere could hear him muttering and swearing to himself as he struggled to be free.

But there was no time to waste. Doubtless Mazaroff would be out of his room in a little time, and it was just possible that he might come that way. Lechmere slid down the bannisters as a schoolboy might have done; he had an open pocket knife in his teeth. Noiselessly he came down upon the struggling man and gripped him by the shoulders.

"Don't you make a sound," he hissed. "Not one word unless you want this knife plunged into your body. Be still, and no harm shall come to you."

The other man said nothing. He allowed himself to be cut free from the salmon line and dragged behind a kind of housemaid's closet at the foot of the stairs. At the same moment Mazaroff came along. The two men there could see the dark outline of his anxious face as he lighted a vesta to aid him in seeing what was going on.

"Don't you make a sound," he hissed.

"Got away, I expect," he muttered. "A precious near thing, anyway. But if he is clear off the premises I may as well go this way myself."

So close did Mazaroff pass the other two that Lechmere could easily have touched him. His companion gave no sign, perhaps Lechmere's fingers playing about his throat warned him of the danger of anything of the kind. Mazaroff disappeared in the gloom, a door closed with a click, there was a muffled echo of retreating footsteps and then Lechmere's grim features relaxed into a smile. He jogged up his captive.

"Now we shall be able to get along," he said, "Will you be so good as to precede me, sir?"

"Do you know who I am?" the other man replied. "Because if you are not aware of my identity——"

"I am quite aware of your identity," Lechmere said coolly. "And I should do again what I am doing now if necessary. I daresay you regard the thing as a magnificent joke, but when you come to realise the enormous mischief that you have done, why——"

Lechmere shrugged his shoulders by way of completing his sentence. He pushed the other man along the corridor until he came to Maxgregor's rooms, where he hustled his prisoner inside. He stood winking and blinking there in the light, the very image of the king with his orders on his breast and his flame-coloured hair gleaming in the light. Shamefaced as he appeared, there was yet a kind of twinkle in his eyes.

"Behold your king," Lechmere said. "Behold the source of the trouble. Your majesty must find the heat very much in that wig. Let me remove it."

He coolly twitched the flame-coloured thatch away and disclosed a close crop of black hair. The queen threw up her hands with a gesture of amazement.

"Peretori," she cried. "Prince Peretori! So you are the cause of all the mischief. Will you be so good as to explain yourself?"

"There is no very great resemblance to the king, now that the wig is removed," Jessie whispered to Maxwell who stood beside her. "Do you know I rather like his face. Who is he?"

"Prince Peretori of Nassa, a second cousin of the King of Asturia," Maxwell explained. "There are many mad princes in Europe but none quite so mad as Peretori. He is not bad or wicked, he is simply utterly irresponsible. The great object in his life is the playing of practical jokes. Also he is a wonderfully fine actor—he would have made a great name on the stage. It is one of his boasts that he can make up to resemble anybody."

"He doesn't look like an enemy," Jessie said in the same low voice.

"He's not," Maxwell replied. "In fact Peretori is nobody's enemy but his own. I should not be in the least surprised to find that he had been made use of in this business."

"Why have you committed this crowning act of folly?" the queen asked coldly.

"Is it any worse than usual?" the prince asked. "My dear cousin, I did it for a wager. The price of my success was to be a thousand guineas. Now a thousand guineas to me at the present moment represents something like salvation. I am terribly hard up, I am painfully in debt. In this country those commercial brutal laws take no heed of

station. I ignored certain civil processes with the result that a common tradesman can throw me into gaol at any moment for a debt that I simply cannot pay. That I am always ready for a joke you are aware. But a remunerative joke like this was not to be denied."

"Therefore you believe that you have won the bet from Countess Saens and Prince Mazaroff?" Lechmere asked. "Do they admit that you have won?"

"They do, my somewhat heavy-handed friend," the prince cried gaily. "Though how on earth you came to know that the countess and Mazaroff had any hand in the business——"

"We will come to that presently," Lechmere resumed. "You talked that matter over with the countess and Mazaroff and they gradually persuaded you to try this thing. You were to go to the editor of the *Mercury* and pass yourself off as the King of Asturia. You were to tell him all kinds of damaging things, and he was to believe you. If he believed you to be the king, you earned your money."

"Never was a sum of money gained more easily," Peretori cried.

"Yes, but at what a cost!" the queen said sternly. "Peretori, do you ever consider anything else but your own selfish amusements? Look at the harm you have done. Once the printed lie crosses the border into Asturia, what is to become of us all! Did you think of that? Can't you understand that all Europe will imagine that the king has resigned his throne? Desperate as things are, you have made then ten times worse."

Peretori looked blankly at the speaker. He was like a boy who had been detected in some offence

and for the first time realized the seriousness of it.

"I give you my word that I never thought of that for a moment," he said. "It is one of my sins that I never think of anything where a jest is concerned. That smug little editor swallowed everything that I said in the most amusing fashion I had won my money and I was free. My dear cousin, if there is anything that I can do——"

The queen shook her head mournfully. She was quite at a loss for the moment. Unless, perhaps, the tables could be turned in another way.

"You have been the dupe of two of our most unscrupulous enemies," the queen went on. "They are agents of Russia, and at the present moment their great task is to try and bring about the abdication of the King of Asturia. Once this is done, the path is fairly clear. To bring this about these people can use as much money as they please. They have been baffled once or twice lately, but when they found you they saw a good chance of doing our house a deadly harm. A thousand pounds, or fifty times that amount mattered little. How did they find you?"

"I have been in England six months," Peretori said. "I dropped my rank. There was an English girl I was very fond of. I was prepared to sacrifice everything so long as she became my wife. It doesn't matter how those people found me. The mischief is done."

"The mischief is almost beyond repair," Lechmere said. "But why did you come here? Why did you sit before the open windows in the next suite of rooms?"

"That was part of the plan, my dear sir," Peretori exclaimed. "Probably there was somebody watch-

ing who had to be convinced that I was the King of Asturia. I flatter myself that my make-up was so perfect that nobody could possibly——"

"Still harping on that string," the queen said reproachfully. "Why don't you try and realize that the great harm that you have done has to be repaired at any cost? With all your faults, you were never a traitor to your country. Are you going to take the blood-money, knowing what it means? I cannot believe that you have stooped so low as that."

The face of Peretori fell; a shamed look came into his eyes.

"I shall take it," he said. "I shall spoil the Egyptians. But at the same time, I can see a way to retrieve the mischief that I have done. It is not too late yet."

CHAPTER XXXV

A RACE FOR A THRONE

A SILENCE fell on the little group for a time. All Peretori's gaiety had vanished. He looked very moody and thoughtful as he sat there turning recent events over in his mind. With all his faults, and they were many, he was an Asturian at heart. He was prepared to do a deal for the sake of his country. He had always promised himself that some day he would settle down and be a credit to his nationality. The career of mad jest must stop some time. It was impossible not to understand the mischief that he had just done. But there was a mobile and clever brain behind all this levity, and already Peretori began to see his way to a subtle and suitable revenge.

"Have those stolen papers anything to do with it?" he asked. "That Foreign Office business, you know?"

"They have everything to do with it," said Lechmere. "As a matter of fact, Countess Saens has had those papers stolen from her in turn. She cannot move very far without them. That she suspects where they have gone is evidenced by the fact that she put your highness up to your last escapade. The way she was tricked herself inspired her. If you can do anything to even matters up——"

"I will do more than that," Peretori cried. "I have thought of something. It is quite a good thing that the countess regards me as no better than a feather-headed fool. She will never guess that I

have been here, she will never give you people credit for finding out what you have done. It was very clever of Mr. Lechmere to do so."

"Not at all," Lechmere muttered. "I have seen your smart impersonations before, and guessed at once who I had to look for. My finding you right here was a bit of luck. Will you be so good as to tell us what you propose doing?"

"I think not, if you don't mind," the prince replied. "I might fail, you see. But, late as it is, I am going to call upon Countess Saens. My excuse is that I have won my wager, and that it was a cash transaction. Has the queen a telephone in her private apartments at the hotel?"

The queen explained that the telephone was there as a matter of course. Peretori rose to his feet. "Then we had better adjourn this meeting for the present," he said. "It will be far more cautious and prudent for the queen to return to her hotel. You had better all go. Only somebody must be imported here to look after General Maxgregor, whose life is so valuable to Asturia."

Lechmere explained curtly that he would see to Maxgregor's safety, after which he would follow to the queen's hotel. With a nod and a smile, Peretori disappeared, after removing all traces of his make-up.

He was quite confident that he would be able to turn the tables on those who had made use of him in so sorry a way. The queen could make up her mind that she should hear from him before the night was over.

In a dazed, heavy way Jessie found herself in a handsome sitting-room in the queen's hotel. She became conscious presently that Lechmere was back

again, and that he was discussing events and recent details with the queen. Jessie wondered if these people ever knew what it was to be tired. Usually she was so utterly tired with her long day's work that she was in bed a little after ten o'clock, and it was past two now. She could hardly keep her eyes open. She sat up as the queen spoke to her.

"My poor dear child," she said quite tenderly, "you are half dead with fatigue. I must take care of you after all you have done for me. And you are going to bed without delay."

Jessie murmured that she was only too ready to do anything necessary. But the queen would not hear of it. Jessie must go to bed at once. The girl was too utterly tired to resist. In a walking dream she was led away; a neat handed maid appeared to be undressing her, there was a vision of a soft, luxurious bed, and then a dreamy delicious unconsciousness. The queen bent and kissed the sleeping face before she returned to the room where Lechmere awaited her.

"It is good to know that I have so many real friends," she said. "And they are none the less kind because I have no possible claim on them. You have arranged everything?"

"Thanks to the telephone, madame," Lechmere explained. "The rest I have managed by cable. The special train to Dover will be ready in half an hour; the special steamer awaits its arrival. The king will be in Asturia almost before that damning paragraph reaches there. If he goes *soon*."

"He should be back here by this time," the queen said with some anxiety in her voice. "Captain Alexis promised me——But somebody is coming up the stairs. Ah, here they are!"

The king came into the room followed by Captain Alexis. He seemed moody and depressed now. Probably the effects of the drug were passing off. He said sullenly that he was going to bed. The queen's face flushed with anger. She spoke clearly and to the point. She told him precisely what had happened. The king followed in a dull yet interested way.

"Am I never to have any peace?" he asked brokenly. "What is the use of being a king unless one——"

"Acts like a king," the queen said. "Have you not brought it all on yourself by your criminal folly? Were you not on the point of betraying us all? Now that is past. You are not going to bed, you are going to be up and doing. It is your part to show Europe that your enemies' plans are futile. You will be on the way to Asturia in half an hour, and Captain Alexis and this gentleman accompany you."

The king protested feebly; it was utterly impossible that this thing could be. But all his weak objections were thrust aside by the importunity of the queen.

"You are going," she said firmly. "All things are ready. It is a thousand pities that I cannot accompany you, but my place is in England for the next ten days. All has been done; even now your man is finishing the packing of your trunks. In half an hour the train starts for Dover. If you are bold and resolute now, the situation can be saved and Asturia with it."

The king protested no further. He sat with a dark, stubborn expression on his face. It seemed to him that he was no better than a prisoner being

removed from one prison to another with two warders for company. Not that he had the slightest intention of going to Asturia, he told himself; it would be no fault of his if ever he set foot in his domains again. But all this he kept to himself.

The little party set off at length, to the unmistakable relief of the queen. She felt now that something was being done in the cause of home and freedom. Russia was not going to be allowed to have everything her own way. She paced up and down the room, a prey to her own painful thoughts.

"Is there anything more that I can do for you, madame?" Lechmere asked. "If there is, I pray that you command my services, which are altogether at your disposal."

"Perhaps you will wait a little?" the queen said. "I expect we shall hear from Peretori presently. What we have to do now is to recover those missing papers. It is maddening to think that they may be lying in the gutter at the present moment. If we dared advertise for them! Can't you think of some way? You are so quick and clever and full of resource."

Lechmere shook his head. Perhaps he might think of some cunning scheme when he had the time, but for the present he could not see his way at all. To advertise would be exceeding dangerous. Any move in that direction would be pretty sure to attract the attention of the enemy.

"The enemy is sufficiently alert as it is," Lechmere pointed out. "There is Countess Saens, for instance, who has a pretty shrewd idea already of the trick that has been played upon her. If she had no suspicion, she would not have gone to

Charing Cross Hospital to-night. And your majesty must see that, at all hazards, she must be prevented from going there in the morning. That scandal must be avoided. It would be a thousand pities if Miss Galloway or Miss Harcourt——"

"I see, I see," the queen cried as she paced restlessly up and down the room. "In this matter cannot you get Prince Peretori to give you a hand? There is a fine fertility of resources in that brilliant brain of his. And I am sure that when he left here to-night he had some scheme——"

The tinkle of the telephone bell cut off further discussion. At a sign from the queen Lechmere took down the receiver and placed it to his ear. Very gently he asked who was there. The reply was in a whisper that it could hardly be heard by the listener, but all the same, he did not fail to recognize the voice of Prince Peretori.

"It is I—Lechmere," he said. "You can speak quite freely. Have you done anything?"

"I have done a great deal," came the response. "Only I want assistance. Come round here and creep into the house and go into the little sitting-room on the left side of the door. All the servants have gone to bed, so you will be safe. Sit in the dark and wait for the signal. The front door is not fastened. Can I count upon you? Right! So."

The voice ceased, there was a click of the telephone, and the connection was cut off.

CHAPTER XXXVI

ANNETTE TELLS A STORY

PRINCE PERETORI was a by no means unpopular figure with those who knew him both personally and by reputation. He had in him that strain of wild blood that seems peculiar to all the Balkan peninsula, where so many extravagant things are done. In bygone days Peretori would have been a romantic figure. As it was, Western civilization had gone far to spoil his character. Audacious deeds and elaborate practical jokes filled up the measure of his spare time. For some months under a pseudonym he was a prominent figure at a Vienna theatre. It was only when his identity became threatened that he had to abandon his latest fad.

But he was feeling deeply chagrined and mortified over his last escapade. It never occurred to him at the time that he was doing any real harm. The King of Asturia, his cousin, he had always disliked and despised; for the king he had the highest admiration. And it looked as if he had done the latter an incalculable injury.

That he had been touched on the raw of his vanity and made the catspaw of others added fuel to his wrath. It would be no fault of his if he did not get even the Countess Saens. He would take that money and pretend that he enjoyed the joke. But it was going to be a costly business for Countess Saens and her ally Prince Mazaroff.

Peretori had pretty well made up his mind what line to take by the time he had reached the house of the countess. The place was all in darkness, as if everybody had retired for the night; but Peretori had his own reasons for believing that the countess had not returned home. If necessary he would wait on the doorstep for her.

But perhaps the door was not fastened? With spies about, the countess might feel inclined to keep the house in darkness. As a matter of fact the door was not fastened, and Peretori slipped quietly into the hall. He had no fear of being discovered, if he were discovered he had only to say that he had come back for the reward of his latest exploit. To the countess he had made no secret of the desperate nature of his pecuniary affairs.

The house seemed absolutely at rest, there could be no doubt that the servants had all gone to bed. Peretori stood in the hall a little undecided what to do next. His sharp ears were listening intently. It seemed to him presently that he could hear the sound of somebody laughing in a subdued kind of way. As his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, a thread of light from under a distant door crossed his line of vision. Then there was the smothered explosion that was unmistakably made by a champagne cork.

Peretori crept along to the door under which the track of light peeped. The door was pulled to, but the latch had not caught. Very quietly Peretori pushed the door back so that he could look in. It was more or less as he had expected. Seated at a table where a dainty supper had been laid out was a man who had the unmistakable hall-mark of a gentle-

man's servant written all over him. On the other side of the table sat the countess's maid Annette.

"Another glass," the maid was saying. "It is a brand of the best. Nothing comes into this house but the best, *ma foi!* And no questions asked where things go to. So help yourself, *mon* Robert! There is no chance of being interrupted."

The man sat there grinning uneasily. There was no conspirator here, Peretori decided. The man was no more than a shrewd cockney servant—none too honest over trifles, perhaps, but he was not the class of man that political conspirators are made of. It was a romance of the kitchen on Robert's side.

"Bit risky, ain't it?" he said as he pulled at his champagne. "If your mistress catches us——"

"There is no fear of that, Robert. She is in bed sound asleep long ago. Nothing wakes or disturbs her. She undressed herself to-night; she dispensed with my services. Oh, a good thing!"

"But risky sometimes, eh?" Robert said. "Lor, the trouble that some of 'em give!"

"Oh, they have no heart, no feeling. It is slave, slave, slave! But we make them pay for it. I make *her* pay for it. And when I am ready to go back to Switzerland, I know that I have not worked in vain. And she called me a liar and a thief to-night."

Robert muttered something sympathetic. He had no wish for Annette to go back to Switzerland, he said. He had saved a little also. Did not Annette think that a respectable boarding house or something select in the licensed victualling line might do? The girl smiled coquettishly.

"And perhaps something better," she said, drop-

ping her voice to a whisper. "I am not dishonest, I do no more than other ladies in my position. Not that the perquisites are not handsome. But sometimes one has great good luck. She call me thief and liar to-night; she say I not tell the truth when I say she was robbed to-night. I show her the real thief, and still she is doubtful. The real thief took those papers. Mind you, they were papers of great value. That is certain. Suppose those papers came into my possession! Suppose I read them, and find them immense importance! Suppose that they don't belong to the countess at all, that she has got them by a trick!"

Peretori listened eagerly. Now that he was *au fait* of the situation, he knew exactly what Annette was talking about. He blessed his stars that he had come here to-night. Without doubt Annette was talking of the papers missing from the Foreign Office.

"Sounds good," Robert said. "Worth fifty or sixty pounds to somebody else perhaps."

"Worth ten thousand pounds!" Annette went on in the same fierce whisper. "That money with what we have saved, eh? We could take a boarding house in Mount Street and make a fortune, you and I, my Robert. Look you, these papers vanish, they are taken by a lady in a black dress. My mistress she say the lady meet with an accident and is taken to a hospital. The police come in and ask questions—*ma foi!* they ask questions till my head ache. Then they go away again, and my mistress leave the house again. My head ache so that I go and walk up and down the pavement to get a breath of air."

"Sounds like a scene in a play," Robert said encouragingly. "Go on, ducky!"

"As I stood there a policeman come up to me. I know that policeman; he is young to his work—he admires me. You need not look so jealous, my Robert, it is not the police where my eyes go. But he has heard of the robbery. Not that he knows its importance—no, no! He can tell all about the lady in Piccadilly who was run over. And behold he has picked up a packet of papers!"

"Good business!" Robert exclaimed. "You're something like a story-teller, Annette."

"That packet of papers he show me," Annette went on gaily. "There is an elastic band round them, and under the band an envelope with the crest of the countess upon it. Those papers were to be give up to Scotland Yard, mark you. But not if Annette knows anything about her man. Behold in a few minutes those papers are in my pocket. It is a smile, a little kiss, and the thing is done! Frown not, Robert, I have no use for that soft young policeman."

"You're a jolly deep one, that's what you are," Robert said with profound admiration. "I should like to know what those papers are all about. I suppose you've read 'em?"

"No; they are in French, the French used by the educated classes. The language is very different to my Swiss. But I have a friend who will be able to tell me what they are all about. Meanwhile, the papers are carefully hidden away where they cannot be found. My policeman, he dare not speak; even if he did, I could say that the papers were rubbish which I had thrown away. But the countess she call me a liar and a thief. She shall never see them again. What's that?"

A sudden violent ringing of the front door bell

startled the supper party and the listener in the hall. Robert rose and grabbed his hat as if prepared for flight.

"No, no!" the fertile Annette whispered. "Don't go. I'll reply to that bell. It is easy to say that I have not gone to bed, and that I came down. Stay where you are. You are quite safe. It may be a cablegram, they sometimes come quite late at night. Just turn down the light."

Peretori stepped into one of the darkened rooms and awaited events. He saw Annette come into the hall and flick up the glaring electrics. In her usual demure way she opened the front door and confronted a fussy little man who stood on the step.

"Your mistress," he said hurriedly. "Your mistress. I must see her at once—at once!"

"But my mistress has gone to bed," Annette protested. "She is asleep for some time, and——"

"Then you must wake her up," the little man said. "At once. It is no use to make a fuss, my good girl, I am bound to see the countess. Tell her that Mr. Hunt is here—Mr. Hunt of the *Mercury*, whose business will not brook delay."

CHAPTER XXXVII

CROSS PURPOSES

PERETORI gave way to a fit of silent laughter. Born comedian that he was, he fully appreciated the comedy of the situation. He did not need anyone to tell him why Hunt was here. But there was a serious side to the matter too, and the prince was not blind to that. Hunt pushed his way into the dining-room with the air of a man who is quite at home with his surroundings and put up the lights. As Annette disappeared up the stairs, Peretori fumbled his way to the telephone and gave Lechmere a whispered call. He had an idea that he would be in need of assistance presently, and the sooner it came the better. Then he felt that he could stand there in the dark and watch the interesting development of events.

Annette came tripping down the stairs again presently with a look of astonishment on her face. She found Hunt fuming about in the dining-room. He turned upon her sharply.

"Well?" he asked. "You have aroused your mistress? I trust that she will not keep me long."

"But it is impossible that she should do anything else, M'sieu," Annette protested. "I told you that my mistress had gone to bed. I had been out late to-night myself, and there were things to do after I came in. That is why I was ready to answer your ring. I say the countess was asleep under the profound impression that such was the fact. I go

to wake my mistress, and behold she is not in bed at all!"

"What does it matter so long as she gets my message?" Hunt asked impatiently.

"But she does not get your message, M'sieu," Annette protested. "She is not there. The countess is not in the house at all. I recollect now that when I respond to your ring the front door is not fastened. It is plain to me that my mistress is not in."

Hunt's reply was more forcible than polite. Annette's face flamed with anger.

"It seems the fashion at present for everybody to say to me that I am a liar," she cried. "I tell you again that my mistress is not in the house. You can wait if you like, and I will not go to bed till she come in. There is no more to be said for the present, M'sieu."

And Annette walked away with her head in the air. There was the sound of shuffling feet in the hall presently as Robert was smuggled out of the house, and Annette retired to her dignified retreat in the small back room. She had hardly regained it before the hall door opened and the countess came in. Annette, with an air of wounded dignity, proclaimed all that had recently taken place. As the light flashed on the face of the countess, Peretori could see that she was visibly disturbed.

"Go to bed, Annette," she exclaimed. "I will see this gentleman who comes at so strange a time."

The countess passed into the dining-room, and as she did so Peretori saw the handle of the front door turn very quietly, and Lechmere crept into the house. He stood motionless just for a moment,

then Peretori stepped out of the little room where he was listening and beckoned to him.

"Come in here," he whispered. "I sent for you because I have an idea that I shall require your assistance a little later on. Hunt is in the dining room. Ah, the quarrel has begun!"

"I tell you I have been fooled," Hunt was saying passionately. "Fooled like a child. You promised me that you would manage that the *Mercury* should contain an interview with the King of Asturia."

"Well? Did I fail in my promise? Did I not send the king to you in a condition when he was prepared to say or do anything? Won't it be all there to-morrow morning?"

"It is all there now," Hunt said with a groan. "Already the country editions of the paper are on the train. A large proportion of the town impressions have gone out also. And you have fooled me purposely."

"What is the man talking about?" the countess cried impatiently. "Anyone would think that I had some object——"

"In making a fool of me. So you have, if I could only understand the reason. As a matter of fact, I have been hoaxed in the most shameless manner possible. The man who came to me was an impostor, a fraud, an actor, and you knew it. When the whole story comes to be told my paper will be ruined, and I shall be laughed out of London. The real King of Asturia——"

"The man is mad!" the countess cried. "The real King of Asturia was with you to-night."

"It is utterly false, and you know it. You are playing this thing off on me for your own ends. I have just had it from the same source that the real

King of Asturia, accompanied by Captain Alexis and another gentleman, have left for Dover by a special train an hour ago *en route* for Asturia. The information came to me from a lady journalist who actually saw the departure from Charing Cross. The lady in question makes no mistakes. I have never known her to be wrong. What have you to say to this?"

For once in her life Countess Saens was absolutely nonplussed. In the face of this information it was utterly impossible to keep up the present fraud any longer.

"So you have got the best of me?" she laughed. "It was a daring thing to do, but I thought that it would pass muster. It cost me a thousand guineas into the bargain. Mind you, I had not the slightest idea that the king would take such strong measures as these, and I am obliged by your priceless information. Now, what can I do to put matters right?"

Hunt made the best of a bad bargain. As a matter of fact he was not quite blameless in the matter.

"Those papers," he said. "Get me those papers. I dare say I can bluff the matter through. We can suggest that somebody is personating the real king. But I must have those papers."

"Ay, if we could only get them!" the countess said between her teeth. "We have clever people to deal with, and you may thank the way I have been fooled to-night for the suggestion of the way in which I have done my best to damage the cause of Asturia. But I am on the track now, and I am going to get to the bottom of it. The first thing to-morrow morning I shall go to Charing Cross Hospital."

"What for?" Hunt growled. "You are talking in enigmas so far as I am concerned."

"Never mind. The enigma will explain itself in good time. I tell you that you shall have those papers. I'm sorry for the trick I played on you to-night, but there is a great stake in my hands. It never occurred to me that the enemy would play so bold a game."

"You hear that?" Lechmere said to his companion. "Now whatever scheme you have in your mind, my dear prince, it must be abandoned to the certainty that the Countess Saens does not go to the hospital at Charing Cross to-morrow. You have a pretty good idea of how things stand, and I look to you to prevent that. Can you possibly manage it?"

Peretori whispered something reassuring. If Lechmere would stay here for a time and watch over the progress of events, he might be able to manage it. Lechmere expressed himself as ready to do anything that was required.

"Very well," Peretori replied. "I am going to slip away for a time. I shall be back in ten minutes at the outside. But don't leave the house, because we have business here later on. There will be a real danger and peril before us presently."

Lechmere nodded in his turn as Peretori stole softly away. The murmur of voices from the dining-room was still going on. The conversation had grown desultory.

"I repeat, I am sorry for the trick I had to play you to-night," the countess was saying. "But you have only to stick to your guns and stand out for the genuineness of your interview. Under ordinary circumstances it would have passed muster.

But what possessed the king to take that decided step? I understood that his nerve was gone. I had it from a sure source that he never dared set foot in Asturia again. And to have gone off in that determined manner! What does it mean?"

Lechmere could have answered that question, as he smilingly told himself. He could tell from the sound of the voices that Hunt was getting nearer and nearer to the door. Presently the pair emerged into the hall. It was fully a quarter of an hour now since Peretori had departed, and Lechmere was getting anxious. At the same moment there was a knock at the door so sharp and sudden that the countess started, as did her companion. The former opened the door.

Just for a moment Lechmere craned his neck to see. But all he noted was a district messenger boy, who handed an envelope to the countess and preferred his pencil for a receipt. The door closed, and the countess tore open the envelope eagerly.

"A thick envelope," she said. "Merely my name printed on it in large letters. What have we here? A visiting card with the name of the Duchess of Dinon on it. That is the *nom de plume* adopted by the Queen of Asturia when travelling. Ah, here is the gist of it! Listen:

"'Meet me to-morrow night Hotel Bristol, Paris, at 9 o'clock. Ask for Mr. Conway. Am watched. Am anxious to escape. Do not fail me. Erno.'"

The countess waved the little slip of parchment in triumph over her head. "From the king!" she said. "From the king to me. He desires to escape, and that plays my game. Give me the time-table that is on the hall table behind you."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

ON BROKEN GROUND

JESSIE opened her eyes and looked languidly around. She could not grasp the situation at first. She was in a large room exquisitely furnished; the silken draperies rustled in the breeze from the open window. Whence came all this luxury, the girl wondered? As she lay there with her hair sweeping over the laced pillow, the events of the previous evening began to come back to her. Fresh and vigorous now after her night's rest, Jessie could smile as she thought of it. It seemed almost impossible to believe that she had gone through so much, that any girl had the pluck to go through such a series of adventures without breaking down.

And yet she had done it! And Jessie thrilled with a little pardonable pride as she dwelt upon the part she had played. At any rate, it had been better than slaving in the shop of Madame Malmaison, without the slightest prospect for the future. Jessie felt that now she had gained powerful friends there was no chance of further genteel starvation. Prince Mazaroff's disgraceful conduct had been a blessing in disguise.

And best of all, it had brought Ronald Hope back to her. Jessie flushed with happiness as she thought of Ronald. She was thinking, too, of her sister. What would Ada imagine had happened? She must find time to send Ada a message. If Vera Galloway was in a position to be moved from

the hospital, then she might resign her part and go home. She would have to keep out of the way for a bit—out of the way of those who were likely to draw their own deductions from the knowledge that Vera Galloway had a double.

Jessie was still turning these things over in her mind when the door opened and a neat-looking maid came in with a dainty breakfast set out on a tray. When this was despatched the maid volunteered to help her to dress, from such things as had come from Vera Galloway's wardrobe. But Jessie preferred to dress herself. She managed very well with a plain skirt and a loose fluffy blouse that looked as if it had been made for her. The queen was already up, and would see the young lady at once, the maid said. Not without some feeling of nervousness, Jessie went downstairs.

She bowed profoundly to the queen, who advanced and kissed the girl.

"You are my friend," she said, "my very good friend. Would that I had others like you. We will talk it over presently. Meanwhile, I have many letters to dictate. How fresh and sweet you look! I wonder if I shall ever feel what it is to be young again! Meanwhile, you are to wait here. There is nothing for you to do but to take care of yourself."

"Indeed, there is a great deal for me to do, madame," Jessie protested. "I had meant to be up and doing long before this; it is already ten o'clock. I have to go to the hospital and see Miss Galloway. She must be removed before the Countess Saens takes any steps."

"I had forgotten that," the queen admitted. "There is so much to be done that one is apt to

forget. You will manage that through Dr. Varney of course?"

Jessie explained that such was her intention. She meant to go and see Dr. Varney at once. After that she would go to the hospital if necessary. Only it would be just as well if she wore a veil, Jessie thought. There was no reason why the attention of the hospital authorities should be drawn to the likeness between the patient and the visitor. The matter of the veil was adjusted without the slightest difficulty, and Jessie left the hotel.

Dr. Varney was not to be disturbed, so his man said. It required something very urgent indeed to interrupt the doctor at this hour. Jessie ignored the suggestion, and, pushing by the astonished man, walked boldly into the dining-room. Varney was not in the least angry.

"So it is you!" he said. "I rather expected this. How bright and fresh you look this morning! So you have not had enough of adventures yet? What are you going to do now? Don't mind my smoking a cigarette, do you? I always do after breakfast. That, between ourselves, is one of the reasons why I don't allow myself to be disturbed. What is the next move."

"To get Miss Vera Galloway home—or rather, to get her out of the hospital," Jessie said. "If we don't, we shall have Countess Saens finding her there. She is certain to call at the hospital some time to-day—probably this morning. If we can be first, well and good. If you can go down with me on pretence of business and profess to recognize Miss Galloway for somebody else so much the better. Then you can say that she is fit to travel, and there is an end of it."

The doctor grinned with a comic expression of dismay.

"Well, you are a nice kind of young lady!" he said. "A pretty proposition truly to a man in my exalted position! Why, if the truth came out it would ruin me. But I suppose you expect to get your own way. Only you can't take Miss Galloway home."

"I don't propose to take her home," Jessie said eagerly. "Lord and Lady Merehaven think that their real niece is staying with the Queen of Asturia for a day or two in the place of an absent woman-in-waiting. To take Vera home would be to spoil everything. Besides, we should have to account in some way for her sprained ankle, and it is quite imperative that nobody should know of that."

"What a clever girl you are!" Varney muttered admiringly. "I begin to see what you are driving at. Go on."

"There is very little more to say," Jessie murmured. "I shall pose as a relation of Vera's—calling myself by my proper name of Harcourt, of course. Dressed in her plain black—or rather in *my* plain black and veil—I shall convey Vera to the queen's hotel and there change clothes. I shall just walk out of the hotel and vanish for the time being, and there you are! The real Vera will be with the queen. She can nurse her ankle for a day or two, and nobody will be any the wiser."

Varney loudly applauded the suggestion. It was just possible, he said, that he was going to get himself into serious trouble, but he was not going to back out of it now. If Jessie would go down to the hospital and see Vera Galloway, he would follow after a discreet interval.

It all fell out exactly as Jessie had hoped. There was little the matter with Vera save for the fact that her ankle was very troublesome, though one of the house surgeons dismissed the idea of the patient being moved for the next day or two. When the discussion was still on Varney came in. He approached the matter in his own quick and breezy fashion.

"Well, young lady?" he cried. "I thought that I recognized you last night, only I wasn't sure. Miss Harcourt's father was an old friend of mine, Cattley. Wants to go home, does she? Well, I don't see any reason why she should not. Matter of a cab, nothing more. Yes, yes."

And Varney moved off as if he had already washed his hands of the matter—a mere incident in the life of a busy man like himself. Jessie hurried on Vera's preparations with a shaking hand. It was just possible that the countess might turn up at any moment. But the operation was finished at length, and the cab was ready at the door.

"Pull your veil down as I have done with mine," Jessie whispered. "You never know who may recognize you. And now lean heavily on my arm, and walk as if nothing was the matter. Ah!"

And Jessie drew a sigh of relief once they were safely in the cab. The cab was dismissed in Bond Street under pretext of shopping, and another engaged. It was just as well to take all precautions, Jessie declared. Vera was looking very faint and worn, but she expressed her warm thanks to Jessie.

"It is really nothing," the latter proceeded to explain what had happened. "As events turn out, everything is going most fortunately for you. As I

have told you, by sheer good luck I managed to escape from Merehaven House without suspicions being excited. Lady Merehaven thinks that you are with the queen and in a very short time you *will* be with the queen. Then you have only to nurse your ankle and get well. As to me, I am going to discreetly disappear from view for the time."

"But you have no money," Vera protested. "You told me last night that you were desperately placed, and that if it had not been for the money you would not have come to me at all. Of course that was all nonsense, because you would have done what you did for me or any other poor girl in distress. Perhaps some day I may be able to properly thank you, dear Jessie. But without money! . . . And I have none."

"I am not going to leave London," Jessie whispered. "I shall be quite safe in my lodgings. And it is very little money I want. What I am looking for is some situation——"

"Situation!" Vera cried scornfully. "As if I should ever permit you to take a situation again! And what is Ronald Hope thinking about? If he really cared for you——"

"He really does care for me," Jessie said with a fine colour. "And if there is any need for you to thank me for bringing Ronald and myself together. . . . But here we are at the hotel."

CHAPTER XXXIX

IN THE CAMP OF THE FOE

AS it so happened—though as yet the girls were ignorant of the fact—they had no need to be afraid of the Countess Saens for the present. She had been cleverly fooled by a trick, as Lechmere learnt directly he was out of the house after hearing the countess read her wire to Hunt of the *Mercury*. Just for a moment Hunt had suspected the King of Asturia of a further act of treachery. But no sooner was he out of the house than Prince Peretori pounced upon him. There was a keen glitter in his eyes.

"Well?" he asked. "I left you in that place yonder with a purpose. Did my bait take?"

"Oh, it was you who sent that card, then?" Lechmere exclaimed. "How did you manage to do that?"

"The idea came to me like an inspiration. We wanted the countess out of the way, and it seemed to me that I knew the exact plan for doing it. I rushed off to the queen's hotel and procured one of her incognito cards to give the thing a real air. Then I forged a message from the king asking the countess to meet him in Paris to-morrow night. All I had to do was to place the thing in the hands of a district messenger boy, and there you are! The question is, Did my bait take?"

"As the countess is at present rushing through the pages of Bradshaw, I should say that the bait had taken," Lechmere said drily. "Our fascinating friend will assuredly be off to Paris by the very

first train that is available. Isn't there an early morning boat? Of course there is, seeing that I have travelled by it many times. The countess will be off in an hour. We'll just hang about here and make sure, and then we can go to bed with easy minds."

Prince Peretori laughed grimly. He lighted a cigarette and smoked it with the air of a patient man.

"We're not going to bed yet," he said. "Our task does not even begin till the countess has gone. I'll throw myself heart and soul into this business, and I don't let go now till I see it through. When the countess has gone, you and I are going to do a little burglary of our own."

"What for?" asked Lechmere. "What are we going to gain by a risk like that? "Besides, if you are after those Foreign Office papers most assuredly they are not in the countess's possession."

"No, but they are in the possession of her maid Annette," was the startling reply. "So I have at length succeeded in astonishing even the stolid Lechmere. My dear fellow, when I went into that house to-night, I found that Annette was entertaining a lover—one Robert, who is unmistakably a gentleman's servant. We must find out who Robert is, and where he comes from, because he may be very useful to us later on. But Annette has those papers, because I heard her say so. A stupid policeman picked them up and handed them to Annette without having the least idea of their value. But the girl has, and she proposes to dispose of them for a good round sum."

"Then our course is quite easy," Lechmere said; he had quite recovered from his surprise again. "The countess will be out of the way for eight and

forty hours at least. That gives us ample time to open *pour-parlers* with the girl for the recovery of the papers."

"And perhaps frighten her and arouse her suspicions. How can you and I approach the girl? My own good friend, it seems to me that my own way is the best. Let us get into the house and search for the papers. If they are of the slightest value, the girl has not hidden them in her box. That would be too dangerous a game, and she is clever. What do you say?"

Lechmere replied that generally he was ready for anything. It was beginning to get light as the countess, accompanied by Hunt, left the house. She was dressed in black with a dark veil, and she carried a small travelling bag in her hand. It was quite evident that the countess had given scant attention to her wardrobe on this occasion as Lechmere pointed out to his companion.

"Let's get into the house without delay," Peretori said. "It's any odds that her ladyship has not said anything to her servants and that she has not aroused the household. She is in the habit of disappearing from time to time thus when urgent business calls."

It proved exactly as Peretori had prophesied. None of the servants were about, on the table in the hall was an open note for Annette saying that her mistress had gone to Paris and that she would wire what time she was coming home again. Lechmere looked a little ironically at his companion.

"So far so good," he said. "The coast is quite clear. What do you propose to do next? You can hardly expect me to creep into Annette's bedroom like a vulgar burglar and examine the girl's

possessions. That is, even if we knew where to look, which we don't."

Peretori shook his head. That was not precisely his way of doing business, he explained. He had a much better scheme than that. He proceeded to the hall door and rung the bell loudly. Lechmere looked at him in blank astonishment. He knew that Peretori was really a man of infinite resources, but his intense love of a practical joke at all times over-ruled all dictates of prudence.

"Are you mad?" Lechmere cried. "What insane folly possesses you? Why, you will have all the servants in the place down upon you at once."

"There's is a kind of proverb of yours that says 'let 'em all come.'" Peretori smiled. "I beg to remark, my dear friend, that this is not one of my escapades. I'll give the bell another ring to make sure. Ah, the rats are beginning to stir in the hole at last!"

Unmistakable sounds of motion overhead came to the ears of the listeners below. A frightened butler in a long coat and carrying a poker in his hand looked over the banisters and demanded feebly what was wrong. A footman or two hovered in sight, and there was a glimpse of petticoats hastily donned behind.

"Come down here at once, all of you," Peretori commanded. "This is a pretty thing. I come here to bring back a little ornament that the countess lost to-night, and I ring the bell and nobody even takes the trouble to reply. Then I make the discovery that everybody is in bed, I also make the discovery that the front door has not been fastened up, leaving the place absolutely to the first burglar that comes along. I may be wrong but it seemed to

me that somebody crept into the house as I came up the steps. It is important that the house should be searched. Put the lights up everywhere. I will go to the top of the house and guard the fanlight leading to the roof. Now get about it at once."

Nobody demurred, nobody ventured to ask questions. There was an air of command about the speaker that shewed him as one accustomed to be obeyed. His face was very stern, but he winked at Lechmere as he proceeded to make his way up the stairs. It was a fairly long search, for the suggestion of a possible burglar in the house had given the shock of alarm that such a suggestion always produces in the women kind and they were loud in the determination that the men should search everywhere.

"And we can lock up after the kind gentlemen have gone," Annette proclaimed. "See, here is a letter from my mistress addressed to me. She has gone off to Paris suddenly by the early boat. It is one of the eccentric expeditions that the countess loves. Has anybody searched the basement?"

Nobody had searched the basement for the simple reason that nobody cared to face the task.

"Begin at the bottom and work up," suggested Lechmere with cynical amusement. "If there is a man here he can't possibly escape you if that system is adopted, as my friend guards the exit in the roof."

"Which is immediately above my bedroom," Annette said with a shudder. "*Par bleu*, we might have all been murdered as we lay asleep. Let the men look everywhere."

It was presently borne in upon the men servants that nobody was in the house, so that their courage rose. They no longer hunted in couples. They were near

the top of the house now, they were quite certain that nobody was about when Peretori descended.

"It was either a false alarm or the man got away by the skylight," he said. "Did I understand someone to say that the countess was not returning to night. In that case you had better see that the door is properly fastened after this gentleman and myself have gone. Good-night to you all. I will say nothing of this to the countess if you promise to be more careful in the future."

The big door closed behind Peretori and Lechmere and was properly secured this time. Lechmere turned to his companion and demanded to know what it all meant.

"Well, I think that is pretty plain," Peretori said. "Our way lies together, does it not? And I confess that I am most terribly sleepy. Oh, yes, as to my scheme. Well, I wanted to get a good idea of the servants' quarters, and where Mademoiselle Annette slept. Mightily snug quarters these maids get in these good houses. And Annette is no exception to the general rule."

"Yes, but you did not find the papers, I suppose?" Lechmere asked with some impatience.

Peretori paused to light a fresh cigarette. His face was quite grave though his eyes danced.

"Not quite," he said. "The maid was a bit too quick for me. But the papers are hidden behind a plaster cast of the Adoration of the Magi high up on the left hand side of the bedroom. I have said it!"

CHAPTER XL

THIN ICE

WITH all her loyalty and determination in the interests of her new friend, Jessie could not repress a sigh of relief once Vera Galloway was safe in the shelter of the queen's hotel. After all said and done, the events of the previous night had been exceedingly trying, and Jessie was feeling in need of a rest. Vera Galloway did not fail to notice this.

"It is impossible for me to properly thank you," she said in a voice that was very unsteady. "What I should have done without you, goodness knows. By this time the man I love would have been ruined. Charlie Maxwell would never have been able to hold up his head again. Oh, if only I had not lost the papers!"

"They will be found," Jessie said. "I feel quite sure that they will be found and you will regain possession of them. At any rate the countess is powerless for present evil. Everything is against her."

The queen came into the room at the same moment. She was kindness itself to Vera, though her face had its sternest expression. She held in her hand a copy of the *Mercury*. She had been reading the sensational interview carefully. Never had there been a more daring or outrageous plot. And thanks to the courage and promptitude of Lechmere it had failed.

"This thing is infamous, daring to a degree," the queen said. "But fortunately the *Herald* comes to our aid. And the king is already on his way to Asturia. It is only the matter of those papers. . . Vera, I suppose I must forgive you for the trick you played on me."

"It was in a good cause," Vera smiled faintly. "You see, there were complicating interests. And yet they were absolutely identical. I wanted to save Charlie and you at the same time and but for a most distressing and unforeseen accident I should have done so. But what a perfect substitute I left behind me! Could any other girl possibly have behaved like Jessie Harcourt?"

The queen forgot her anger and distress for a moment. A little time later and Jessie was walking to her lodgings, her ears tingling with pride and pleasure. She was never going to want a friend again, the way was rosy before her for the future. Ada's pale anxious face brightened and her eyes filled with tears as Jessie came in. It had been an anxious time for Ada.

"You look so strong and happy and yet so tired," she said. "Sit down in the armchair and tell me everything. There is something about you that suggests adventure. But you have not failed."

No, Jessie had not failed, she explained. She told Ada everything from beginning to end; she had to answer a thousand eager questions. When she mentioned the name of Ronald Hope Ada smiled demurely. That was the best news of it all.

"I am glad you and Ronald have met again," Ada said quietly. "We ought never to have left the old home without writing to him. It has been on

my mind to do so frequently, but I thought perhaps that you would not like it, Jessie. Now you are going to sit there and rest whilst I run out and get some paints for those Christmas cards. I have been so miserably anxious about you that I dared not go out before. The walk will freshen me up."

Jessie nodded lazily. A delicious sense of fatigue stole over her. Her eyes closed and she fell into a half sleep. When she came to herself again Ronald was bending over her. Her face flushed as he stooped down and pressed his lips to hers. Perhaps she had been more guarded had she not been taken by surprise, for she returned the pressure.

"That was not fair," she said with a trembling smile. "You caught me unawares, Ronald."

Ronald coolly took a seat close to Jessie's side. He took her hand in his and it was not withdrawn.

"It isn't as if you didn't love me," he said. "You know perfectly well that we always cared for one another. And you would not have kissed me if you had not loved me, Jess. Why you disappeared in that strange manner I never could understand. What difference did the fact make that your poor father had left you penniless? I knew that he was a poor man and that I had nothing to expect but your dear self, and you were quite aware of it. Then when I go to India you disappear and I don't hear any more of you till rumours reach me of the goddess in Bond Street. Jess, you are never going to run away from me again?"

"It does not seem so," Jessie said demurely, "especially if you hold my hand and my waist as

tightly as you are holding them at the present time. But seriously, Ronald——"

"That's the way to talk, seriously! Seriously, my darling Jess, don't you love me?"

"I love you with my whole heart and soul, Ronald," Jessie whispered. "I never realised how much I loved you till we came to be parted and I thought that I had lost you for ever. This time yesterday I was one of the most miserable girls in England, now I am one of the happiest."

"And you are going to marry me right away, dearest?" Hope whispered. "A quiet wedding."

"Presently," Jessie smiled. "Not so fast, if you please. I have my new friends to think of. I can't forget that but for them I might never have seen you again, Ronald. Till that business is finished I am not a free agent. Even at the present moment I am in danger of being arrested on a charge of stealing some papers from the residence of Countess Saens."

"But, my dear girl, you never so much as saw those confounded papers."

"That does not make the slightest difference. The papers were stolen from the residence of Countess Saens by a young girl answering to my description and dressed exactly as I am dressed at the present moment. If I was confronted now with the Countess's maid Annette she would identify me as the thief."

"The real thief being Miss Vera Galloway all the time, Jessie."

"Of course she is. But could I say so? Could I in my own defence go into the witness box and tell the story of my bold impersonation of Vera Galloway so that she could be free to regain those

papers ? Why, by so doing we admit the existence of the papers that we deny existence to at all. If any scandal arises over them, I shall have to bear it alone. Vera Galloway's share must not even be suggested. It must be assumed that I traded on my marvellous rememblance to Vera to obtain certain things from the countess."

"But this is monstrous," cried Ronald. "If it came to a matter of imprisonment——"

"I should go through with it if it did," Jessie declared quietly. "At least I should do so until it was safe to have the truth out. Countess Saens is a bitter foe when——"

"Who can do you no harm," said Ronald. "At present she is on her way to Paris. She has been lured there by a dexterous trick to keep her out of the way."

"But she might have put the matter in the hands of the police before she left ? "

"Perhaps so. I had not thought of that, Jessie. It behoves you to be careful. If any attempt was made to arrest you, but I dare not think of it. If danger threatens, go back to the queen. She can help you if anybody can. Hullo, here is Ada."

Ada's reception of the visitor was flattering enough. She was delighted to see Ronald again, she was almost tearfully glad to find that Ronald and Jessie had come to an understanding. But all the same she confessed that she was frightened. A man had accosted her on her way home with an enquiry as to the spot where Miss Jessie Harcourt lived. He had a parcel in his hand and came from the shop of Madame Malmaison. It appeared that Jessie had left some of her possessions behind and the messenger was anxious to deliver it.

"And I don't believe that he was a messenger at all," Ada said breathlessly. "He was far too prim and dark. He gave me an impression of Scotland Yard. Of course I pretended to know nothing, but I was frightened. Go and see what you think, Ronald. He is in Seymour Street; he has a box under his arm."

Ronald departed hastily. He came back a little time later with a grim face and an uneasy air.

"I am afraid that Ada is right," he said. "The fellow has police force written all over him. I suppose the police are following up the enquiries they made last night. You must go back to the queen without delay, Jess. I fancy I have managed it. I see that there is a way out of these block of rooms in Dean Street. Go down there and stand in the doorway. Presently I shall pull up with a cab just for a second and you are to jump in. Don't lose any time. If you are arrested many questions will be asked, if you can tide over the next day you may escape altogether. I'll see what Lechmere can do."

Hope bustled away and a little time later Jessie crept down the stone stairs leading to Dean Street. She had not long to wait there, for presently a cab drove up and Ronald looked anxiously out. Like a flash Jessie was across the pavement and into the cab.

"Saved this time," Ronald muttered. "I shall leave you in Piccadilly to go back alone. Glad to see that you took the precaution to veil your features. After I have left you I'll go as far as Lechmere's rooms. I daresay we can beat those people yet."

CHAPTER XLI

ANNETTE AT BAY

BUT meanwhile Lechmere had not been idle. His steadygoing brain had not failed to see the danger arise after the matter of the countess's burglary had come into the hands of the police. And he seemed to fancy that he had discovered a way out of the difficulty. After a message to Scotland Yard making an appointment an hour later at the house of Countess Saens he had proceeded to the queen's hotel. He was a little disappointed to find that already Jessie had departed some short time.

He was about to go off in search of Jessie when she returned with her story. Lechmere smiled with the air of a man who holds the key to the situation.

"You need not be in the least alarmed," he said. "Hope was quite right when he suggested that perhaps I could help you in the matter. Not only am I going to help, but I am going to put you a long way out of the reach of the police. We are going as far as Countess Saens's house."

"I am!" Jessie exclaimed. "Why, the mere fact of my being there face to face with the countess——"

"My dear young lady, you are not going to be face to face with the countess. She has gone abroad. You will go with me in a cab, you will keep your veil down and you will wait in the draw-

ing-room until I want you. I daresay all this sounds very abrupt, but it is quite necessary. Now come bustle along before other things come to complicate matters."

Jessie followed in a helpless kind of way. It seemed to her that she was off on another series of bewildering adventures before the last series was closed almost. But she had her previous experience to keep her courage to the sticking point and Lechmere's face gave her confidence. "When am I going to get out of this coil?" she asked with a smile.

"*You* are going to get out of it very quietly," Lechmere said gravely. "And after that you are going to marry my young friend Ronald Hope, whom I regard as a very lucky fellow. When the tangle itself is likely to end, Heaven only knows. The best thing that could happen to the Queen of Asturia would be the death of the king. She would know what peace meant then and the removal of the king by natural means would enable Europe to interfere and so check the designs of Russia. But here we are."

The cab stopped at length and the occupants alighted. At Lechmere's bidding, Jessie raised her veil.

"The countess is not at home?" Lechmere asked the footman. "How annoying! It is rather an urgent and private affair that Miss Vera Galloway desires to see your mistress upon. But perhaps Annette the maid will be able to answer a few questions for me. Shew us into the drawing-room and send Annette to us there."

The footman bowed and shewed no signs of astonishment. He was too used to strange requests

and equally strange visitors to that house. He led the way gravely enough upstairs and announced that he would at once send for Annette to see Miss Galloway.

"So far, so good," Lechmere muttered. "I shall want you to see Annette a little later on, Miss Harcourt, but for the present I shall be glad if you will take you seat in the little inner drawing-room. It is just as well perhaps that you should overhear all that is said."

Jessie asked no questions, but she could not altogether repress a natural curiosity to know what was going to take place next. From where she was seated she had a perfect view of all that was going on in the large drawing-room without being seen herself. Annette came in quite self-possessed and just a little demure in the presence of the tall grey-faced stranger.

"I was told that Miss Galloway was here, M'sieu," she said. "It strikes to me, M'sieu——"

"As a matter of fact Miss Galloway is not here at all," said Lechmere coolly. "This is another young lady whom you will see all in good time, but not quite yet. I had no desire to arouse the curiosity of your fellow servants. The footman, for instance, who is a very good-looking fellow, may be a lover of yours. Ah, so there has been tender passages between you?"

"M'sieu is a gentleman and cannot be contradicted," Annette said demurely. "If you say so——"

"Oh, well. That is bad hearing, I am afraid you are a sad flirt. What a dreadful tragedy might be precipitated here if this thing came to the ears of your devoted Robert."

Annette changed colour and the smile died out of her eyes. She looked quite anxiously at the speaker.

"Listen to me," he said sternly. "I am disposed to help you and shield you if you help me. If we make a kind of compact together I will say nothing about those champagne suppers and I will keep my own council over certain important papers that may later on be sold for a good round sum—a sum so big, in fact, that Robert and yourself will be able to take a boarding-house. Where was it that you preferred the establishment? Ah, I have it—in Brook Street."

All the blood left the listener's cheeks, the audacious expression faded and left her eyes cloudy and troubled.

"M'sieu is too clever for me," she whispered. "What do you want me to do?"

"Very little. It is about a robbery here. Now it is positively absurd that Miss Galloway could be the thief as you suggested. You smile, you fancy that perhaps Miss Galloway has a double. Now it all rests on you to say whether that double is the proper person or not. If she was produced by the police and you said it was *not* the lady who surprised you last night, why, there would be an end of the matter—for you and Robert."

A look of quiet cunning intelligence flashed across Annette's face.

"It is plain what you mean," she said. "I quite understand. I am brought face to face with the young lady and I stare at her again and again. I study her with a puzzled frown on my face—like this—and then I say that it is not the person. I am absolutely certain of my facts. She is different,

the eyes are not the same colour. I know not what the eyes and hair of your friend the young lady are like, but whether *they are* like the missing thief's are different. See, M'sieu ? "

"I see perfectly well, Annette," Lechmere smiled. "You see that man loitering on the other side of the road ? Fetch him up here and say that Mr. Lechmere is waiting. He is a leading official at Scotland Yard, and I am to meet him here by appointment. Oh, by the way, where is your Robert to be found ? "

"Guards Buildings," Annette whispered. "He waits on the second floor gentleman there. But you will not——"

"No, I will not," said Lechmere, passing his hand over his face to hide a smile, for he had made a further discovery. "Play your part properly and I will play mine. And now go and fetch Inspector Taske here and say that I am waiting for him."

Inspector Taske came up and Lechmere conducted him into the small drawing-room. At a sign from him Jessie raised her veil. She began to understand what was coming.

"This is Miss Jessie Harcourt," said Lechmere, "daughter of my old friend Colonel Harcourt. It has been suggested that Miss Harcourt came here last night and stole certain papers. She only found it out this morning when she—er—came out of the hospital. All this absurd bother has arisen because Miss Harcourt is exceedingly like Miss Galloway whom the maid Annette here stupidly picked out as the thief, picked her out at Merehaven House, mind you, when she was in full evening dress at a party ! Then suspicions were

directed to my young lady friend here, forsooth because of the likeness, and she is being tracked by your fellows, Taske. There is a strong light here, and I am going to settle the matter once and for all. Now, Annette, look very carefully at this lady and say if you have ever seen her before."

Jessie bore the scrutiny more or less firmly and haughtily because she herself had never seen Annette's face before. Everything depended upon the girl's reply. Her examination was long and careful, as if she did not want to outrage her conscience in the smallest degree. Then she shook her head.

"The likeness is great," she said. "Positively there are three young ladies almost the same. And we make mistakes—and did not you police bring a man all the way here from Australia the other day on a charge of murder only to find he was the wrong person? And he had been sworn to, *ma foi*. Therefore it behoves me to be careful. All the same, I can speak with confidence. If it were dark I could say that here was the thief. But in the daylight, *non*. Her eyes were dark, the hair very rich brown. And here the eyes are grey and the hair a lovely shade of gold. This is not the lady."

The Inspector turned slightly on his heel as if he had heard quite sufficient.

"This ends the matter," he said. "I am sorry that Miss Harcourt has been molested and I will see that she is not further annoyed. I wish you good morning, sir."

The Inspector departed and at a sign from Lechmere, Jessie followed. Annette bowed demurely, but the smile on her face vanished and her eyes grew troubled as she found herself alone. Down in the

street the newsboys were shouting something. Lechmere listened eagerly to hear :—

"Alarming railway accident near Paris. Breakdown of a special train. Suspected outrage on the part of the French Anarchists. Serious accident to the King of Asturia. Special."

CHAPTER XLII

THE COUNTESS RETURNS

LECHMERE bought a paper and read the paragraph for himself. It seemed strange that this thing should happen at a time when everybody was talking of Asturia and its rulers. First there was the sensational interview in the *Mercury* to set all tongues talking and then, almost before the public had grasped what had happened, the *Herald* came out with a flat contradiction and a dignified statement to the effect that the *Mercury* had been hoaxed by an impudent practical joker.

Here was an excellent chance for the evening papers and they did their best to make a good thing of it. But the more things came to be investigated the firmer became the position of the *Herald*. Beyond all doubt the real king had been safe at Merehaven House at the very time when his deputy was closeted with the editor of the *Mercury*.

And now this had come on the top of it all. There was no reason to doubt that the veritable ruler of Asturia had met with an accident, seeing that the *Herald* had proclaimed the fact that he was already on his way to his kingdom. Lechmere shook his head as he read.

"Is this foul play or another link in the amazing chain?" Jessie asked.

"I should say foul play," Lechmere replied. "We have a most dangerous foe to contend with. And at any hazards the king must be kept from

reaching his capital just now. I should not wonder if the special train had been deliberately wrecked——"

"It makes one's heart bleed for the queen," Jessie murmured. "If she comes successfully out of this."

"She won't," said Lechmere curtly. "She is only Asturian by marriage, and the people had never really cared for her, devoted as she is to their interests. They want to get rid of the king. If he abdicates, then Russia comes in. If he were killed at this moment, Russia would still come in. But given a few days longer and Prince Alix will be in Asturia. This is the man the populace want. If they can once proclaim him, Russia is checkmated. You see how things stand?"

"It would break the heart of the queen," Jessi said.

"I think not. She would worry for a time, but her position is intolerable. The present king's life hangs on a thread, the next plunge into dissipation may kill him. And then Asturia would know the queen no longer. She would marry Maxgregor, who worships the ground she walks on, and for the first time in her life would taste real happiness. And now I shall leave you. It is necessary that I sh uld see Prince Peretori at once."

And Lechmere hastened away in pursuit of the Prince. They missed one another by a few minutes but they met at length. Needless to say, Peretori had heard the news.

"You can see exactly what has happened," the latter said. "Countess Saens has gone off in a great hurry to see if she could prevent the king from reaching Asturia. If he reaches his capital

what will happen will be this—he will be invited at once to attend a conference and place himself freely and unreservedly in the hands of his ministers. They will ask him to proclaim his abdication in favour of Prince Alix."

"I see," Lechmere said thoughtfully. "That knocks Russia out. But if the king does not get there at all?"

Peretori chuckled as if something amused him.

"The king is going to get there," he said. "He will be rather damaged by his accident, but he will get there all the same. I'll see to that."

"If you have some scheme in your mind, I should like to know what it is," Lechmere said.

"Not at present, my dear fellow. I did a very foolish thing last night and I am anxious to try and wipe it out. I calculate that I can arrive on the scene of the accident by dark to-night, by using a despatch boat which Lord Merehaven has placed at my disposal. I am going alone and I am going to disguise myself. I may send you a telegram this evening, if I do, hold yourself in readiness to follow me. So far as my cousin and his consort are concerned, Asturia is dead. But it is not going to fall into the lap of Russia all the same."

Nothing that Lechmere could say served to break Peretori's obstinate silence. He had a plan of his own and he was going to carry it out if necessary.

"Go and see the queen," he urged, "go and see Maxgregor. Unless I am greatly mistaken in the character of the queen, she is pretty certain to follow Erno. If she does she is equally certain to make a mess of it. She must not go, and Maxgregor must prevent it. Put Maxgregor in a cab if it is possible to move him, and see that he keeps the queen here.

Tell Maxgregor that I am going to put the third scheme into operation."

"You have seen Maxgregor to-day?" Lechmere asked in some surprise.

"Yes, I saw him early to-day and talked matters over. He abused me in the most shameful manner, but I had to put up with it. Good bye."

Peretori jumped into a passing hansom and was whirled away, leaving Lechmere to his own thoughts. But Peretori's advice was singularly sound from that usually feather-headed individual, and Lechmere decided to go as far as Maxgregor's at once. Maxgregor was sitting up in bed impatiently fuming over an evening paper which lay propped up before him.

"This is a nice mess," he exclaimed. "Of course that special train was wrecked deliberately. Not that it very much matters, seeing that Peretori—but perhaps you have not seen him? You have? Good! Did he send any kind of message to me?"

"Yes," Lechmere replied. "He said that he was going to put the third programme into execution."

Maxgregor chuckled and his dark angry face relaxed. He managed to crawl out of bed, but he was still very weak and staggering. He dressed with Lechmere's assistance.

"Call a cab and take me as far as the queen's hotel," he said. "I must see her majesty alone. It is important that she keeps quiet at this junction. She must be persuaded to drive about and show herself just as if nothing had happened."

But there was nothing quiet about the queen as the two arrived at the hotel. She was pacing up and down the morning room, despite Vera Galloway's efforts to soothe her. The girl lay on a couch, for her ankle was still giving her a deal of pain.

"So you have managed to come to me, brave heart," the queen cried, as she held out both hands to Maxgregor. "What should I do without your devoted courage? Are you well enough to accompany me across the Channel. I am going at once."

"You are going to do nothing of the kind, madame," Maxgregor said sternly. "The thing is already in the most capable hands. May I beg a few words in private with you?"

The queen led the way into an inner room. Vera turned eagerly to Lechmere. Her face was pale and her eyes were heavy with the tears that she was too proud to let fall.

"Is there anything fresh to tell me?" she demanded eagerly. "I did not care to mention my private grief before the queen, who has been so good to me. But Charles Maxwell was in that train also. If there has been a bad accident, if it is to be called an accident——"

"It was no accident," Lechmere said grimly. "The thing was done deliberately. And we dare not make too many enquiries because it may arouse suspicion. Try and fix your mind on something else. It is just as imperative now as it was yesterday to regain possession of those papers you risked so much to get."

"If we could only find them," Vera sighed. "If we only knew into whose hands the had fallen!"

"Well, as a matter of fact we do know that," Lechmere said coolly. "Also we know exactly where they are. And I am going to try and obtain possession of them this very day. The mere fact of those papers coming back into our hands would go far to free Maxwell from suspicion. You follow me?"

It was quite plain that Vera followed. As much of recent events as he dared Lechmere told her. He would be back in a little time, he said, but meanwhile he was going as far as the house of Countess Saens with the object of having another talk with Annette.

Lechmere's mind was perfectly well occupied as he walked along. He had nearly reached his destination when a cab pulled up before the residence of the Countess of Saens. A tall graceful figure carefully cloaked and veiled stepped out and darted for the house without paying the cabman. Evidently the graceful figure had taken alarm at somebody in the road.

"By Jove, it's me," Lechmere muttered. "And that was the countess, for a million. Now what brings her back in a break-neck hurry like this?"

CHAPTER XLIII

IN SEARCH OF THE KING

LECHMERE had plenty of time before him to think out the problem. It would be utterly useless for him to try and see Annette at any rate for some time to come. There was consolation in the fact, too, that Annette would have no opportunity at present for dealing with the papers. Returned to the hotel, Lechmere found that Maxgregor had succeeded in getting his own way with the queen, who had evidently abandoned the idea of going to Paris. She even seemed quite cheerful and resigned.

It was quite late in the evening before Lechmere received his messsage from Peretori. It must have been an expensive one, for it was long :—

"Come over by the night boat," it ran, "accident took place half way between Valais and Paris, near a station called Amiens. Drive there from the junction at Poiteux and do not let yourself be seen, as Mazaroff is here. Ask for Pierre Loti's hut and there await developments. Above all things take care not to be seen. And I am on my way Eastward."

The thing was vague and in a way unsatisfactory. There was no news of the king in it, which was bad, as if some tragedy had happened that the sender of the telegram was afraid to put into evidence. And the mention of Mazaroff made matters distinctly worse. That rascal was evidently acting as deputy to the countess, who had been recalled to England

by some urgent business. But perhaps, after all, she had not crossed the Channel, perhaps she was satisfied to find that the scheme to wreck the special train was certain to prove successful. At any rate she was back in England and would have to be watched. The only man who could do that was Ronald Hope. Lechmere found him at length at Jessie's lodgings talking over matters with her and Ada.

"I will do anything you like," Hope said cheerfully. "My mind is quite at rest now that Jessie is free. My dear fellow, you managed that matter very cleverly indeed."

"Only a little diplomacy," Lechmere smiled. "After all said and done, Annette told no lie. Most emphatically she never saw Miss Harcourt in the countess's house that night. Keep an eye on that clever lady for me and carefully report all her doings. As for me, I am crossing the Channel tonight and I may be away for a day or two. And don't forget one thing—the papers we are looking for are still in Countess Saens's house."

With this significant message, Lechmere departed. The Channel passage was right enough, but the trouble to get to Poiteux was immense. The local trains were few and the breakdown of the line seemed to have disturbed everything. It was nearly dark the next night before Lechmere reached the next village. There was an hotel of sorts there, and at first Lechmere considered the advisability of seeking rooms there. But the idea of coming face to face with Mazaroff was not to be thought of. A railway porter offered his assistance, and Lechmere gladly availed himself of his help. The accident, so he gathered, had been caused by a defective rail on the track, a sufficiently strange thing, seeing that

the line at that point had just been overhauled by the authorities. Lechmere's guide significantly hinted that the police were not quite satisfied with the explanation and that one or two suspicious characters had been arrested.

"Have you any stranger staying here just now?" Lechmere asked.

"But one, sir," the porter proceeded to explain: "a gentleman at the hotel. He came here to see the Duc de Mornay, but he is away from here. So the gentleman is staying in the hotel."

"Fine man with a dark moustache and pointed beard?" Lechmere asked.

The porter intimated that the description was fairly accurate and Lechmere asked no further questions on that head. He knew quite well that Mazaroff was not far off. But what was the enemy doing here after the desired mischief had been accomplished. There was only one more question to ask. What had become of the King of Asturia? The porter put up his hand with a gesture of impatience.

"That is the puzzle," he said. "There were two gentlemen with the king when the accident happened; they are not badly hurt, M'sieu will understand, and they are at two cottages in the village. They are visited from time to time by the gentleman who is stopping at the hotel."

"Spy," Lechmere muttered to himself. "Mazaroff is leaving nothing to chance. As to the king now?"

"As to the king nobody knows anything," the porter resumed. "He simply vanished. There are some who say that he was spirited away by Anarchists, that the whole thing was a vile conspiracy. The

other two gentlemen lay stunned on the ground so that they could see nothing of what was going on. And they are just as puzzled and bewildered over the disappearance of the king as anybody else."

Lechmere nodded as if the thing were of the most trivial importance to him, but he was utterly puzzled. What was the motive or the sense in spiriting off the king in this way? If he was dead, then the game of the conspirators would simply be played for without any further efforts of theirs. Had the king contrived to escape unhurt, and had he taken this chance to get away from those whom he virtually regarded as little better than his gaolers? By this time he was probably enjoying himself in Paris, heedless of the trouble that he was giving to others.

Lechmere figured it out that he would have to get to the bottom of this business for himself. He dared not go near either to Maxwell or Alexis for fear of meeting Mazaroff. It was imperative that Mazaroff should not know of his presence in the village.

The only thing to be done now was to settle down in his lodging and keep out of Mazaroff's way. A clean but frugal meal was provided and despatched, for Lechmere was keen set and for the most part he did not care what he ate when on expeditions like these. After the meal was done he sat smoking and thinking over the problem. Suddenly it occurred to him that he had been told by Peretori's cablegram to ask for the hut of Pierre Loti. Pierre Loti, he found, bore anything but a good character. It was a moot point as to how he got his living; he lived in a hut in the woods close by where the accident had happened and he had been first on the spot. All this interested

Lechmere and he decided to try and find Loti at once. He had no difficulty in running down his man, who was making hurdles in the wood. He received the advances of the Englishman with evident suspicion.

"It is no use fencing about like this," Lechmere said at length. "I have come all the way from England to see you. I had a telegram asking me to do so. Do you understand?"

The man nodded and blinked slowly. His cunning little eyes were turned on Lechmere's face. He took from his pocket a dirty piece of paper and proceeded to spell out some rude signs there.

"I have a friend," he said, "a gentleman who has been very good to me. He was with me in my hut last night. And before he went away he said that very likely a gentleman would come from England to see me. And he said that the gentleman's name began by a certain letter. Would M'sieu be so good as to suggest what that letter is likely to be?"

Lechmere was on the right track at last and could afford to be patient. He smiled at this caution.

"I should say it would be the letter L," he said, "followed by Lechmere. Is that good enough for you or do you want further proof?"

"That is exactly as it should be," Loti said approvingly. "Lechmere is the name. Now, sir, I was close by when the accident happened yesterday. It was I who helped the wounded people out. The driver and his assistant were killed. One gentleman was unconscious and the other had a little sense left. He asked me to take care of the third gentleman, to get him away in fact and say nothing to anybody till the signal came. Only he wanted my name. Then this gentleman he failed also, and a little time later people came on the scene. I carried away the one gentleman

to my hut and said nothing of it to anybody till another gentleman came along. He was the gentleman who was kind to me and told me that a friend of his called Lechmere would come along presently and reward me. I shall have to be rewarded, for I am doing what in the eyes of our law is a crime——"

"You need not worry in the least about your reward," Lechmere said impatiently. "Take me to your hut and let me speak to the person you are hiding there."

"Let him speak to you?" Loti said with widely open eyes. "I do not understand. You do not understand. But come this way; I keep my lips sealed and I say nothing to anybody. It is a dangerous position, but money can accomplish most things. This way, sir; I will see that you are not followed, for there are dogs about with sharp noses. This way."

The hut was reached at length, the door closed cautiously. In a little lean-to shed was a heap of straw, and this straw Loti proceeded to remove with a careful hand.

"Look down," he whispered. "Look down and see if you have ever seen him before."

Lechmere started back surprised and dismayed, almost unnerved for the moment. For the dead white face looking so calmly up at him was that of the ill-fated King of Asturia!

"The dead white face—was that of the ill-fated King of Asturia."

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CHAPTER XLIV

DEAD !

THERE lay the body of the King of Asturia without a doubt. The first painful shock of surprise over, Lechmere was his cool prudent self again. He knew that Loti was watching him, so it behoved him to be careful. He bent down and made a long examination of the body. He would have given much at this moment for a few words with Peretori, but the latter seemed to have vanished and apparently had repudiated any further responsibility after sending the telegram. But then perhaps Peretori was playing some game of his own.

" Do you know anything about this gentleman ? " he asked of Loti.

The ragged peasant shrugged his shoulders indifferently. Obviously the man had no suspicions that he was so closely on the fringe of an international tragedy. He was quite sure that the disaster to the special had not come about by accident and he murmured something about socialists. So long as he was well paid for what he was doing, his services could be relied upon.

" There is more money for you, here," Lechmere said, placing the soundest argument before the peasant, " if you are silent. If you go to the police now they will ask awkward questions. And they will pay you nothing. Can you procure a plain coffin and convey the body by road to, say, Amiens ?

Only the coffin must be packed in another case so as to disguise what it is, and I will give you the name and address whereby I can pick up the case to-morrow. If you can do this thing for me I will pay you no less a sum than two thousand francs."

Loti's eyes gleamed. Such a sum was beyond his wildest dreams. It would make him independent for the rest of his life. He nodded eagerly.

"Well, that is settled," Lechmere proceeded. "Listen. Later on in the day I will give you the address to be placed on the case. Bring me back the receipt from the railway people at Amiens and the money is yours in cash, so that no suspicion need be excited. I will meet you here to-morrow at the same time. You quite understand?"

Loti nodded, his eyes were gleaming like stars. It was obvious that he understood perfectly. Lechmere made his way back to the cottage where he had obtained shelter, and there wrote a long letter to the Head of the Police in Paris. This he despatched by special parcel so that it would be delivered in the course of the afternoon. He waited till dark before setting out with the object of seeing Maxwell and Alexis. There was considerable danger in this course, seeing that Mazaroff was close at hand, and, above all things, Lechmere had no idea of being seen by the Russian.

That the train had been deliberately and wantonly wrecked with a view to preventing the journey of the king to Asturia, Lechmere knew quite well. To further their own design these people had taken no heed of human life, they had stopped at nothing. And yet their plan had not been carried out quite so successfully as they had hoped though a great meed of triumph had been theirs. No doubt

Mazaroff was hanging about the neighbourhood to report progress. But Mazaroff would be puzzled and rendered somewhat uneasy by the strange disappearance of the king. That he was dead the Russian could not possibly know or he would have visited Pierre Loti.

All these things Lechmere turned over in his mind as he made his way after dark to the cottage where Maxwell was lying. The primitive peasants who gave him shelter had already retired to bed, but the door had not been fastened, possibly to permit of the visit of the doctor. Lechmere cautiously opened the door and looked in. The common sitting-room of the family had been divided by a couple of sheets over a clothes-horse, and behind this Lechmere guessed that the patient lay, from the smell of carbolic on the sheets. Lechmere secured the door as a means of precaution, and passed behind the sheet. As he expected, Maxwell lay there.

His face was terribly bruised and battered, but the restless motion of his limbs testified to the fact that the nervous vitality was not greatly impaired. Maxwell opened a pair of languid eyes as Lechmere touched him on the shoulder.

"Go away," he said. "Why do you bother? There is nothing much the matter with me if I were not so terribly sleepy. I can't get my head right. I don't know what that peasant fellow is doing? I gave him all the money I had, too. What's the matter?"

Maxwell's eyes suddenly changed, he identified Lechmere with a smile of pleasure.

"I felt quite sure that you would turn up," he whispered. "Was I successful? Did I baffle

them? But you don't know anything about that or about the king——"

"Indeed I do," Lechmere hastened to reply. "I know everything. The king is dead, because I have seen his body. And by this time the little plot has been successful. The king has not returned to his capital, and it will be understood by his people that he has taken advantage of the accident to go off on one of his dissipated excesses, and the revolution will be in full blast."

"But those people don't know that the king is dead?" Maxwell asked eagerly.

"They don't. You worked that business very cleverly. And Peretori must have been pretty near, for he sent me a cablegram telling me what to do. I found your Pierre Loti. He shewed me the body of the king covered with straw in his cottage. Did you manage all that?"

"I did," Maxwell said, not without a smile. "When the accident happened it came to me like a flash that the whole thing had been brought about by design. Our carriage was literally smashed to pieces and we were thrown on the permanent way. The engine-driver and stoker were killed, so I and Alexis managed to stagger as far as the engine. The king lay perfectly motionless and I felt that I was going to collapse. It was at this point that Pierre Loti came up. I gave him all the money I had in my pocket to get the king out of the way and say nothing till he heard from me again. I should say that he has obeyed instructions."

"To the letter," Lechmere said. "The king is dead, he must have been killed on the spot. I compliment you sincerely on the manner in which you contrived to keep this thing a secret. So long

as the foe are in ignorance of the full measure of their success we have a chance. And I have made arrangements for the king to be conveyed to England secretly, Mazaroff is still hanging about here on the off chance of picking something up."

"Which he will not do. But what has become of our new ally, Peretori?"

"That I can't say," Lechmere replied. "Though I have a pretty shrewd idea. But it is useless to speak of that just now. What does the doctor say is the matter with you?"

"Shock, and yet I feel quite well at times. I can't keep my eyes open. I have the strange sensation of being drugged. I am so thirsty that I have to have a big jug of lemonade always by my side as you see. I am as tired as a dog again now."

And Maxwell closed his eyes. There was the sound of a step outside the cottage and the door opened very cautiously. With a sudden instinct Lechmere passed at the back of the sheets into the glow beyond just in time to avoid Mazaroff, who was the newcomer. Holding the sheet slightly back, Lechmere could see exactly what was taking place. He saw Maxwell lying as if in a heavy sleep, he saw the sinister smile that came over Mazaroff's face. The longer the protectors of the absent king lay there helpless so much the better for Mazaroff and his party. The Russian took a little bottle from his pocket and proceeded to drop a few spots from it into Maxwell's lemonade. With the same sinister smile on his face he crept away in the direction of the door. Was he carrying on the same game with Alexis, Lechmere wondered, or was some confidante doing the work?

Lechmere looked grim rather than angry, as he followed the Russian into the open air. He was going to see if the experiment was destined to be repeated on Alexis. It would be the last time, Lechmere told himself, for he had that morning put a spoke in Mazaroff's wheel which ought to stop the coach at any moment. Near the little village hotel to which the Russian made his way two official looking men were standing, a blue paper in the hand of one of them. One of them stepped up and bowed profoundly.

"Prince Mazaroff," he said. "Surely I have the honour. Ah, I thought so. You will consider yourself my prisoner in the interests of the Criminal Department of Paris. It is the warrant that I hold in my hand. You will have to come with me to Paris."

Mazaroff swore and threatened. He would like to know something of the charge. As the charge was read over his bluster and threats subdued to a little cry of dismay.

"It is a case of mistaken identity," he said. "Where are you going to take me? To Paris? It is very unfortunate, but circumstances are too strong for me, and I yield."

CHAPTER XLV

CHECK!

MAZAROFF was disposed of at any rate for the present. Lechmere's letter to the Chief of the Police in Paris had not been futile. He was pretty well posted with the life story of the man who called himself Prince Mazaroff, who, in point of fact, was one of the greatest scoundrels of his time. Under another name the French police had long wanted him for an old offence, and Lechmere had been in a position to supply the missing details and facts for indentification. Besides, the head of the Paris police was an old acquaintance of Lechmere's and valued his opinion highly. Thus it was that no time was lost in tying Mazaroff by the heels after receipt of Lechmere's letter. Mazaroff was a cunning enough scoundrel, but he had more than his match in the old queen's messenger. The coast was quite clear now.

Nothing was in the way of taking the body of the unfortunate king back to England. Nobody must know that he had died, at least not for the present. The secret was valuable for the moment. Of course the queen must be told, and General Maxgregor, but nobody else. It was early the next morning that Lechmere saw both Alexis and Maxwell and found them going on well. He explained briefly to both what had happened.

"You will both be about again in a day or two,"

he said. "Meanwhile it exactly suits the position of affairs for you to be here as invalids who are incapable of seeing anybody. But I have arranged with the doctor to keep the gentleman of the pencil at bay. You know nothing, you are capable of no opinion, you are utterly indifferent as to what has become of the king. Obviously he has escaped somewhere or his body would have been found. I fancy you understand."

There was no reason to repeat the question. With an easy mind, Lechmere made the best of his way back to London. With the aid of a few cigars, he worked the matter out to the end. He could see his way to damp the pretty scheme of Countess Saens and also regain possession of those papers. Nor would he shew his hand in the matter at all. The thing would cause a little sensation in London perhaps, there would be complications partaking of an international character, but there it would end.

Lechmere drove straight with his gruesome burden to the rooms occupied by General Maxgregor. He found the latter considerably better and ready for work again. The flesh wound in the old soldier's shoulder had quite healed up, that fine constitution made little of the loss of blood.

"The very man I have been longing to see," Maxgregor cried. "When I heard that you were not in London, I felt sure that you were following that strange matter up. Was it an accident?"

"Of course not," Lechmere said with fine contempt. "Did you suppose for a moment that it was? The thing was planned and accomplished by Mazaroff. Who his confederates were does not matter for the moment. At any rate he managed it. It would never do to let the king reach Asturia.

But there was one thing they did not reckon on—the disappearance."

"The luck that ever follows the foolish," Maxgregor growled. "The only man uninjured. He takes the first opportunity to get away from his gaolers. In his callous way, heedless of the fact that they are badly hurt, he takes a carriage and goes to Paris. He has no money, but the King of Asturia can always raise that in the French capital. Am I right ? "

"No, you are quite wrong," Lechmere said gravely. "The king is dead. I have his body with me at the present moment. Mind you, nobody knows anything about it. But perhaps I had better explain to you how we managed to keep the tragic affair a secret."

Maxgregor listened eagerly to Lechmere's story. His grave face was tinged with deep melancholy.

"That is very sad," he said. "It will be a dreadful blow to the queen. After all she has gone through and suffered it will break her heart to know that Asturia will fall to Russia in spite of everything."

"Asturia is not going to fall into the hands of Russia," Lechmere said drily. "Cunning as those people are, we are going to be one too many for them. After all said and done, nobody outside our little circle knows that the king is dead. I will explain presently. Meanwhile the king must be buried. We must get a certificate without delay. When the time comes the story can be made public."

"It will be difficult to get a certificate from an ordinary doctor," said Maxgregor.

"I grant your point, my friend. But we can get a certificate from Dr. Varney, who attended the

king on and off for years during the time he visited London. And Varney often warned the king that any shock might be his end. I should say that he died of the shock. Any way we'll get Varney in and ask his opinion. Have you a room that you can spare? If so we will complete my gruesome task and lock the body carefully away. Get your man off the premises."

The whole thing was managed at length, and a little later and then Varney came in. He made a long and careful examination of the body before he gave his verdict.

"There is nothing broken," he said. "The cause of death has nothing to do with violence. Of that I am certain. This sudden fright acting on a heart all to pieces and nerves like brown paper did the mischief. The shock stopped the heart and the King of Asturia died. There is nothing to prevent my saying that I was called in here to see the body of the King of Asturia and that I certified that shock was the cause of death. I am so sure of it that even had the patient been a common man, I should have certified that there was no cause for an inquest."

"So that we may get the body buried without delay?" Maxgregor asked.

"Well, I should say not," the cautious Varney said. "I am perhaps stretching a medical point and I do not want to get myself into further trouble. For political reasons we do not want the public to know that the King of Asturia is dead. I am prepared to swear as to what killed him. But kings are not buried like ordinary bodies, they are generally embalmed. In the course of a few days the sad news may be made public and then the

body can be taken to Asturia and buried in state. The embalmers need not know of the high rank of their subject."

Varney was absolutely right, as Lechmere saw at once. Besides, if his calculations were correct, the sad news would be made public very soon now. People would ask questions but they need not be answered. There was nothing for it now but to break the news to the queen.

"I think I'll get you to do that," Lechmere said to Maxgregor. "You are such an old friend and you can speak to the queen in tones that I should not venture to address to her. But it will be all right so far as Asturia is concerned—Russia is going to fail there. And you and I and one or two others will go down to the grave holding one of the most romantic and wildest political secrets that has ever taken place in Europe. Good luck to you, my friend."

Maxgregor went off at once to the queen's hotel. He found her, to his surprise, not in the least gloomy or anxious; on the contrary there was a fine smile on her face.

"I have been longing for you," she said. "If you had not come to me, positively I must have invaded your rooms. Have you heard the good news—I mean the good news of the king?"

Maxgregor looked with some alarm at the royal speaker. Thoughts of a brain unhinged by trouble rose before him. Evidently the queen had taken leave of her senses."

"The good news," he stammered. "Margaret, there is no good news. Somebody has been cruelly deceiving you. You must be prepared to hear that which is bad, very bad."

"But the king escaped," the queen cried. "He escaped from the wrecked train and made his way secretly and swiftly to our capital. It was perhaps the one unselfish and manly action of his life. He was bruised and battered but he was sufficiently himself to meet his ministers. Tomani has cabled me."

"Impossible!" Maxgregor cried. "Madame, the king is dead. He was killed in that accident. Mr. Charles Maxwell, though sorely hurt himself, managed to get the body conveyed to a place of safety so that nobody should know, and the body has been brought to England. Mr. Lechmere managed it in the most wonderful way. The body is at present in my rooms safely under lock and key. I have seen it, Mr. Lechmere has of course seen it, and so has Dr. Varney, who is prepared to certify that the cause of death was shock to the system. I came here on purpose to bring you the ill tidings. I pray you be buoyed up with no hopes on such a fallacy as this. If you like to come and see for yourself——"

The queen passed her hand across her brows in a bewildered sort of way. At the same time she took up a grey cablegram from the table by her side.

"Listen to what Tomani says," she cried. "Listen—'King here safe but knocked about from the result of his accident. Met him myself. Is at present in consultation with ministers. Will let your majesty know result of deliberations as soon as settled. Tomani.' Paul, what does it mean?"

But for once in his life General Maxgregor was incapable of reply.

CHAPTER XLVI

MATE IN TWO MOVES

MAXGREGOR made no reply for a moment. It flashed across his mind that some person or persons were playing a cruel hoax on the queen.

But a moment's reflection served to show that such a thing was impossible. In the first place the telegram was in the cyper used by the queen in communicating with Tomani, the only really faithful friend she possessed in the councils of the government party of Asturia. And Tomani's honour was beyond question.

The queen was first to speak. She crossed over and laid a shaking hand on Maxgregor's arm.

"You must be mistaken," she said. "Unless Tomani—but not for a moment do I doubt *him*. I trust him as implicitly as I trust yourself. And yet you say—you say——"

"That the king is dead, madame. The king was killed in the disaster that happened to his special train between here and Paris. Mind you, nobody knows of this with the exception of the faithful few into whose hands you would place your life safely. As a matter of fact the disaster was no accident at all, it was deliberately brought about by Countess Saens and Prince Mazaroff for their own ends. The miscreants disappeared and I am afraid that we shall not have the satisfaction of laying them by the heels. The driver and stoker of the train were killed so that it is impossible to

obtain their testimony. Captain Alexis and Mr. Charles Maxwell escaped by a miracle, though they are both badly knocked about. It was Mr. Maxwell who saved the situation and contrived to get the body of the king smuggled away."

"But the telegram, General, the telegram?" the queen cried. "Tomani says that the king is in our capital closeted with ministers. Perhaps at this very moment——"

"But, madame, I assure you that the king is no more," Maxgregor protested. "There is some strange maddening mystery here that will be explained in time. I say the king is dead, if necessary I am prepared to prove that to you. The body was smuggled away so that Russia should have no pretext for interfering. It was essential that they should not know what had happened, for the present at any rate. They must not know till we can get Prince Alix on the scene."

"You are assuming a thing that you can prove?" the queen asked hoarsely.

"Indeed I am, madame. Try and realise the fact that your sway is ended. It expires with the life of the king as you know. Therefore, we must put all private feeling aside and strain every nerve to get Prince Alix to Asturia before the Russians learn what has happened. Once Prince Alix is nominated to the succession, Russia is powerless. Do you follow me?"

"I should follow you better if I were certain that you were telling me hard facts, General."

"Heaven only knows that I am, madame. That the king is dead is beyond question. Let me finish what I am going to say. I have had everything from Lechmere. He had a mysterious mes-

sage from Prince Peretori urging him to go at once to the scene of the disaster. He was told to visit the cottage of a certain peasant and give proofs of his identity. There he saw the body of the king hidden away. The body was brought back to England, and at present it is locked in one of my rooms. I have seen it, Lechmere has seen it, so has Dr. Varney."

The queen passed her hand across her forehead with a gesture of despair.

"It is all bewildering and so confusing, so sudden!" she cried. "You come to me and tell me this a few minutes after the receipt of Tomani's telegram."

"I do not wish to be hard or unkind," Maxgregor interrupted. "But I must ask you for the present to forget that telegram. That side of the mystery will doubtless be cleared up in time. What most concerns us now is the king and the fact that his death must be concealed from everybody until we have had time to communicate with Prince Alix. Of your dream and mine we can say nothing; that is shattered. Our whole energies too must be devoted to the task of defeating Russia. And the king has to be buried, you understand."

"But that cannot be done without necessary formalities," the queen protested. "In England——"

"Yes, I know that in England they do things differently to what they do abroad. But most fortunately, we have Dr. Varney on our side. He attended the king, he is prepared to certify that death was the result of a shock and that nothing in the way of an inquest was necessary. Officially, the doctor is not supposed to know anything about the railway accident. He is not bound to speak

of what has happened until officially, you, as royal consort, see fit to announce to the world that King Erno of Asturia is no more. Varney suggests that the body be embalmed and conveyed to Asturia for burial. You see everything plays for our hand if we can only be bold and do not lose our opportunities."

The queen made no reply for a little time, she paced up and down the room lost in thought. A kingdom had slipped through her fingers, all her darling ambition had fallen suddenly to the ground. The cup of humiliation was full to the brim and she had to drink it to the dregs. And yet through it all was the consolation that peace and quietness henceforth would be her portion. She had been tried beyond her strength of late.

"Paul," she said, with a gentle sweetness that surprised Maxgregor. "I place myself entirely in your hands. I have done more than a woman's portion and I have failed. The fact that I knew that I should fail from the first does not render my humiliation any the less bitter. The king is dead, and for his own sake and mine I do not regret it. My married life has been a nightmare, I am glad that it is over. How can I grieve for this thing when I remember what I have suffered? Henceforth I take no part in politics—that is, after we have successfully placed Alix on a firm throne. The people will follow him as they never would have followed me, devoted as I was to their interests. When you came in I was getting ready to start for Asturia. I was going to travel incognito and let it be understood that I was still in England. And that splendid girl Jessie Harcourt was coming with me. It is just as well that she should be out of the

way for some little time, and her courage and devotion are splendid."

Before Maxgregor could make any reply, Jessie came into the room. She was quietly dressed in black and evidently ready for a journey. At the sight of the queen's pale face and the presence of Maxgregor she started and backed towards the door. The queen detained her.

"This is no private conversation," she said. "at least not so far as you are concerned. I should like you to know everything, for I feel how implicitly I can trust you. General Maxgregor brings some startling news. News so strange that I would not believe it for a time. He says the king is dead."

"Dead!" Jessie exclaimed. "But that telegram, madame. Surely your friend Tomani——?"

"Is beyond reproach. Nor can I believe that anybody has obtained access to my private cypher. And yet the king is dead. The General will tell you all about that."

Maxgregor reported his story over again, Jessie listening with dilated eyes. How many ages ago, she wondered, since she was filling her dreary routine duties in Bond Street. But she seemed to have left that old life behind her years ago. She was piecing the puzzle together as Maxgregor spoke. At the name of Peretori a sudden light flashed in upon her.

"Prince Peretori," she cried. "It was Prince Peretori who sent that mysterious telegram to Mr. Lechmere. Then the Prince must have known all about it, I mean *after* the accident. And Prince Peretori was the man who impersonated the king for the sake of a bet and then foolishly played into the hands of Countess Saens and the rest of them.

It was he who passed himself off to the Editor of the *Mercury* as King of Asturia. Surely you can see what has happened ? "

"I wish I did," Maxgregor muttered. "It would simplify matters wonderfully."

"Why, the problem is already solved," said Jessie. "Prince Peretori was sincerely sorry for the part he had played. He said he would do his best to make amends. Ah, he is far cleverer in his frivolous way than you give him credit for. He foresaw something of this and hung in disguise on the track of the king. He was not far off when the accident took place. And thus he was on his way when he was assured of the fact that the king was dead. Once more he played the part of the King of Asturia. He made up as the king, he would probably use a few bandages and a discoloured face so as to make detection absolutely impossible. The king was expected in his capital and the prince went there instead. Hence the telegram from Tomani who had not detected the imposture. By this time you may be sure that Prince Alix is on the spot. It is the old story of the comedy man who comes forward at the crisis and saves the play."

"She is right," Maxgregor shouted. "For a a million she has hit the right nail on the head."

CHAPTER XLVII

THE SITUATION IS SAVED

THERE was no reason to say any more. Both listeners felt that the situation was saved; they felt, too, that Jessie was absolutely right. Her logic lacked no force, because it was so clear and simple. The queen paused in her agitated walk and crossed towards the door.

"That is settled, then," she said. "My dear friend here has solved the problem. But there is yet much to be done before we are safe and Asturia is preserved from the grip of the wolf. I should like to see the king."

Maxgregor had no objection to make. Perhaps on the whole it would be better for the queen to be quite sure that he told no more than the truth. It was a sufficiently sad hour that followed before the queen returned to her hotel again. She was hardly back before Lord Merehaven was announced. His easy air vanished as he entered the room, he looked very old and agitated. There was just a wild gleam in his eyes as his gaze fell on Jessie.

"I have been hearing strange things, madame," he said. "My niece has been confessing the truth. So it was this young lady who was responsible for so many of the startling events of the other night. Not that I propose to recognise that I am in anyway——"

"For Heaven's sake, forget that you are a diplomat and a minister for once, my lord," the queen

said. "This is a matter that closely touches your personal honour and mine. I beg you to believe that I did not know of the change of identity till this young lady accompanied me here from your house. Surely you must recognise her bravery and courage, that she ran all these risks merely to help one whom she had never seen before. It was a strange position for a lady——"

"An impossible position for a lady," Merehaven said drily.

"I think not," the queen said, just a little coldly. "It was done on the spur of the moment. If your niece has told you everything, surely you must be aware of that."

"My niece has told me everything, madame," Merehaven went on. "She had planned a desperate enterprise to save the man she loved and she wanted to so place it that she could leave the house all the while her friends could testify that she had not gone beyond the front door. And Vera came very near to success——"

"Very near to success!" the queen cried. "She *did* succeed. She obtained possession of those missing papers. It is true that she lost them again, but they passed out of the possession of Countess Saens and thus deprived her of one of her most powerful weapons. The bold attempt to free Mr. Maxwell from blame——"

"Mr. Maxwell was not in the least to blame, as matters turned out," Merehaven explained. "Captain Lancing was the culprit all through. Mr. Maxwell was foolish in his little flirtation with the Countess—which by the way she forced upon him—gave colour to his guilt. It was Maxwell's wild endeavour to save Lancing that brought sus-

picion on him, but I shall be able to satisfy Maxwell's chiefs that he has nothing to ask forgiveness for when the time comes. As a matter of fact a letter written by Captain Lancing before he committed suicide has come to hand and he takes all the blame."

"But this need not become public property," the queen said.

"It is not going to become public property," Merehaven said. "We shall let the rumour die. We shall assume that the whole thing was merely a foolish newspaper canard. All the same there were papers stolen and they *did* pass into Countess Saen's hands. And Count Gleikstein is acting as if he knew the contents and as if he had possession of the papers. Probably it is only bluff, but it is giving me a deal of anxiety."

"You mean that you cannot feel quite certain whether or not those papers are in the hands of the Count or not?" Jessie asked. "He is acting as if he possessed them?"

"You are an exceedingly clever young lady," Merehaven smiled. "That is exactly the point. I have a wonderfully shrewd man to deal with and he is puzzling me utterly. If he has not the papers and I can prove it, then I can afford to laugh and affect ignorance. Whereas——"

"Perhaps I had better tell you exactly how things stand," the queen remarked. "You need not know anything of this officially as yet, but the more fully you are posted the better for your fight with Count Gleikstein. I am going to tell you a story that will astonish you, diplomat as you are."

The queen did not boast. Merehaven was unaffectedly astonished and showed it. He walked

up and down the room muttering to himself as he walked.

"Did ever anybody ever hear anything so amazing," he said. "If I could only be sure now what has become of those stolen papers. Does anybody guess where they are?"

"I can't go as far as that," Jessie said. "But I can guess who does know. I fully believe that lost secret will be found in the possession of Mr. Lechmere."

Merehaven gave a grunt of delight. The moody frown passed away from his face. "You really are a very clever young lady," he said. "I suppose when the time comes to smooth out things I shall have to forgive you for the part you have played. But your suggestion as to Lechmere is brilliant, distinctly brilliant. I'll go to him at once."

The early edition of the evening papers was once more full of the affairs of Asturia, and the newsboys were proclaiming the fact as they ran along before Merehaven. It was quite clear from the rumours emanating from the Asturian capital that the enemy had no real grip as yet of the true position of things. King Erno was back again in his capital once more, he had met his disaffected ministers frankly and openly for once in his life, and he was prepared to place himself entirely in the hands of his advisers. He admitted that he had not been a model monarch in his time, but then, physically and intellectually, he was not fit for so exalted a position. If there was any question of his successor, he should like to name Prince Alix, whom he had every reason to believe was close at hand.

Merehaven chuckled as he walked along reading all this from a *Telephone*. Once Prince Alix accepted

the successor, Russia would be beaten. And that they should be so innocent as to stand by when, had they known it, all the cards were in their hands was a piece of diplomatic success that pleased Merehaven exceedingly. He even forgot his troubles over those evening papers and the battle with Gleikstein.

Lechmere was not at home, but he had left directions that if anybody desired to see him particularly he was to be found for the next hour or so at the Orient Club, and thither Merehaven made his way. He found Lechmere reading an evening paper and smoking a long black cigar as if he were one of the most idle and purposeless men in the world. But as he glanced up at Merehaven's face he saw that the latter knew everything. He laid his paper aside and drew Merehaven into a corner.

"I suppose you have heard the amazing story, my lord?" he asked.

Merehaven replied that he had nothing to acquire in that direction. He plunged immediately into his subject. He could be very direct and to the point if he chose.

"That is why I came to you," he said in conclusion. "Is it not possible that you can give me a real helping hand in the direction of recovering those confounded papers?"

"I think that I can be of material assistance to you and that before very long," Lechmere smiled. "I have laid the match to a carefully prepared mine and the explosion may take place at any moment. You see I take a considerable interest in the career of international adventurers, and the careers of both Prince Mazaroff and Countess Saens interest me exceedingly. I hinted to you that if

the continental police liked to follow certain things up it would be awkward for the lady. As to the gentleman, I gave such information about him as led to his arrest and subsequent detention in Paris Unless I am greatly mistaken, he will not trouble the world much for the next few years. Now it so happens that I also desire to have the Countess Saens out of the way for a space. There are certain possessions of hers that I desire to examine. So I have found the means."

"Will that bring those papers into sight, though?" Merehaven asked.

Lechmere rather thought that it would. He was proceeding to explain when an excited man rushed into the smoking-room evidently primed and bursting with some fine piece of scandal. He pounced upon the two acquaintances in the window as proper recipients of the news.

"The latest, the very latest," he cried. "Who on earth would have thought it? A fine woman like that with a good position and any amount of money. Who do I mean? Why, Countess Saens. Arrested by the police as she was getting into her carriage and taken to Bow Street like a common thief. Charged with forgery or something of that kind. What?"

Lechmere rose very quietly from his seat and pitched his cigar into the grate.

"Come along," he whispered. "There is no time to be lost. Unless I am grievously out in my calculations, those papers will be in your hands before the hour is up."

CHAPTER XLVIII

THE PAPERS AT LAST

LORD MEREHAVEN followed Lechmere eagerly down the steps of the club. He was anxious and excited now as any schoolboy with the prospect of a last holiday before him. The diplomatist became merged in the mere man. He plied Lechmere with questions.

"I think that we had better have a cab," said the latter. "In the first instance we have to go as far as General Maxgregor's rooms. After that we will proceed to the residence of Countess Saens. Yes, you are quite right. It was I who supplied the police with the information that led up to this sensational arrest."

"Pity you had not done it before," Merehaven spluttered, as he jammed his top hat in the door of the hansom. "It would have saved a wonderful lot of trouble."

Lechmere demurred. He had known for some time a great deal of the past of the woman who was known to society as Countess Saens. As a matter of fact he had bided his time, little dreaming how soon it would be necessary to make use of his information.

"I think I told you before who the woman was," he said. "Or was it General Maxgregor? Anyway, it does not in the least matter. For my part, I rather regret the necessity for putting this woman out of the way. It is far better to keep such people

under observation and thus keep in touch with one's enemies. But I could see no other way."

"But you won't frighten her into speaking," Merehaven said.

"Of course we shan't. She has too much pluck for that. I want to get her out of the way because it is desirable to search her house for the missing papers without suspicion of our designs. And we are going to find the papers there sure enough."

"Surely you must be mistaken," Merehaven protested. "If the countess still has the papers, she would have handed them over to Count Gleikstein, who would have made profit over them. She would have given us no quarter like he is doing now."

"I did not say that the countess had the papers," Lechmere said drily. "I said they were in the house, which is quite a different matter. But here we are at Maxgregor's."

Maxgregor was out as the hall porter-valet Robert told Lechmere. But the latter did not seem in the least disappointed. He proceeded up the stairs to the general's rooms, intimating that Robert had better follow him. The man did so wondering, but he had no anxiety for himself yet. Lechmere wanted to go into the general's bedroom, he also wanted to see the suit of dress clothes worn by the general on the night of his return from Lady Merehaven's reception. With some little demur Robert produced the garments in question from a wardrobe. Lechmere smiled with an air of easy triumph as he produced a flat packet of papers from the dress coat pocket.

"Exactly as I expected," he murmured to Lord Merehaven. "This is the dress suit worn by the king when he was smuggled into your house by

the queen and her tiring woman on the night of the reception. As I have told you before, Maxgregor escaped in the king's clothes. In these clothes was the Deed of Abdication ready for signature as handed to the king by Marazoff. If you will open that packet you will see whether I am wrong or not."

Lechmere was not wrong, it was the Deed of Abdication right enough. Very grimly Lord Merehaven placed it in a position of safety. It was a strong weapon that Lechmere had afforded for his next interview with Count Gleikstein.

"I felt quite certain that we should find it," Lechmere said. "And now let us proceed a stage further. Where is General Maxgregor's telephone, Robert?"

Robert explained that the telephone was in the next room. The servant seemed a little easier in his mind as he led the way to the sitting-room. Then Lechmere closed the door and looked at the man keenly.

"You are going to do something for me, Robert," he said. "Be so good as to call up No. 99996 Belgravia. Ah, I see that the number is well known to you. I have every reason to believe that you have called up that number many times before. Now listen to me and do exactly what I tell you or you may make the acquaintance of the inside of a gaol before long. You are going to help me to find certain papers which, though you may not be a party to stealing them, you know all about them and their value and the like."

"I am sure that I don't know what you mean, sir," Robert said sulkily.

"Then it will be necessary for me to refresh your memory, Robert. I mean those papers that you

were discussing the other night with Annette—the night you had the champagne supper at Countess Saens' house. The papers returned by the policeman, you know, found by him in Piccadilly. You and Annette were going to sell them and buy a boarding-house in Brook Street with the proceeds. I think it would be far better for you to recollect, Robert."

The valet-porter collapsed without further signs of fight. There was nothing of the born conspirator about him. He was no more or less than a tolerably dishonest London servant. He was quite ready to do anything that Mr. Lechmere asked him.

"Then call up 99996 and ask for Annette," Lechmere said curtly. "Say that you must see her at once here without the slightest delay. No occasion to explain the reason. Then you can hang the receiver up quietly as if you were cut off, so that the young woman has no time to ask questions. After that you will come with me in my cab. It won't be gallant conduct so far as Annette is concerned but I can't help that. You can make the best of your explanations later on."

"What do you want that fellow for?" Merehaven asked, as Robert proceeded to carry out his instructions.

Lechmere replied that he had no need whatever of Robert's services, but that he had not the smallest intention of leaving him there to sound the note of alarm over the telephone directly they had gone. Lord Merehaven had not seen this point, it would have escaped him. But Lechmere was not in the habit of leaving his pawns unaccounted for like that. He listened close by the telephone till he heard the small distant voice of Annette saying that she would

come round at once, then he jerked up the receiver and rang off connection sharply.

"Now come along," he said. "By the time we reach the residence of Countess Saens, Annette will be well on her way here, indeed we shall probably pass her in the cab. For the sake of our friend Robert it will be necessary to take a four-wheeler this time. Come along."

Lechmere proved to be perfectly correct as to the meeting of Annette on her way to keep the appointment. The cab pulled up not too close to the countess' residence and Lechmere alighted, bidding Lord Merehaven wait until he returned. As he expected, the house was in the hands of the police pending the arrival of the owner's agent, who had been telegraphed for. The inspector in charge was an old acquaintance of Lechmere's and seemed glad to see him.

"Bit of a sensation, this, Roscoe," Lechmere said guardedly. "But one never knows, do they?"

Roscoe smiled with the air of a man who was used to these surprises. He intimated that this was going to be a big business, there would be a formal remand applied for, and after that the foreign police proposed to take a hand in the matter.

"Have you had the house searched yet?" Lechmere asked. "No? Well, you'd better get a warrant. As a matter of fact the countess is a brilliant political spy and there may be things here well worth the inspection of the British Government. Don't say I didn't give you the tip. I suppose you don't mind my going over the house. I may see something worth noting."

Roscoe had no objection whatever. Lechmere made an elaborate pretence of inspecting the room

and then he strolled up to the servants' quarters in a casual way. This was Annette's room sure enough. Lechmere remembered Peretori's description well enough to recollect that. And on the wall high up was a plaster cast of a crucifix with a figure extended upon it. Lechmere listened a moment to make quite sure that nobody was about, then he climbed up with the aid of a chair. As he had expected, the back of the cast was hollow and in the cavity was a bundle of papers. Without the slightest feeling of excitement he untied the tape that fastened them, glanced his eyes over the contents, and walked down stairs again. He nodded to Roscoe as he passed out.

"Nothing so far as I can see," he said. "Don't forget to apply for a search warrant."

He dismissed the four-wheeler in the street and told Robert curtly to go about his business. He had no further use for the valet-porter. The task was done.

"Well?" Merehaven asked eagerly. "Well? One can judge nothing from your face."

"Good thing for me," Lechmere said imperturbably. "But what do you think of this? There are your papers."

And Merehaven was only too glad to admit that Lechmere was right.

CHAPTER XLIX

LOVE AND ROSES

IT was late the next afternoon before Maxwell arrived in London. He was still feeling ill and shaky, but there was hope in his heart now, for Lechmere's telegram recalling him had given him reason to believe that everything was perfectly settled. He dressed and walked as quickly as he could to Lord Merehaven's house. He had been instructed to do so by Lechmere's telegram. He was a little surprised and confused to find Lord Merehaven shaking him cordially by the hand and inviting him to sit down.

"Everything has been explained," Merehaven said. "You were a little foolish, Charles, but I don't see that you were in the least to blame. We are all foolish where pretty women are concerned. We know now how the countess tried to drag you into the business, in fact Lancing had left a letter explaining everything and absolutely exonerating you from blame. Of course Vera did not know of it when she set out on her dangerous mission, and left that splendid creature Jessie Harcourt to take her place. It does one good to know that this old country can produce such girls. Nobody knows anything, not even as to Lancing's letter or of the death of the King of Asturia. It is all settled."

"Except as to those missing papers," Maxwell said, suppressing a tendency to laugh hysterically.

"The papers are recovered," Merehaven chuckled as he proceeded to explain. "I have seen Count Gleikstein to-day and I fancy that he will respect me a little more in the future. We have won all along the line. And the news from Asturia is good. Of course we in the secret know how that matter has been arranged—that Prince Peretori played poor King Erno's part and posed as the king. Everybody believes that Erno has abdicated in favour of Prince Alix, who is in the capital of Asturia, where he was crowned yesterday with the acclamations of the people. Peretori is on his way back to England and before nightfall the papers will have it that he has reached London. The papers will also say that he went at once to the rooms of General Maxgregor and that he was looking shockingly ill. All this had been arranged, you understand. To-morrow all London will be grieved to hear that the king passed quietly away in the night at the general's rooms. That is all right because the body is there and Dr. Varney will give the necessary certificate. Those who wish to be sure will see the body for themselves. And I don't forget how carefully you managed that business, my boy, at a time when you were knocked about in that accident. The thing is a most extraordinary romance, one of the strangest affairs that ever happened in Europe. But Europe will never know it and the world will be the poorer for one of the finest plays ever left unwritten. I forgot to say that I probably vindicated your character in the House of Lords last night. I stretched my conscience a bit, but it had to be done. And now I am going to give you a few days' holiday.

Let me get back to my papers again. Oh, I forgot to say that Lady Merehaven wants to speak to you. You will find her in the drawing-room, I think."

Lord Merehaven fairly hustled his young guest out of the room without waiting for any further thanks. His step was lighter and his eyes more sparkling than it had been for some days. All the same, he drew back a little as he saw that Vera Galloway was waiting for him alone.

"My aunt had to go out," she said demurely. "She will not be long, Charlie. Oh, my dear boy, how foolish you have been, and how splendidly you atoned for your folly."

Charles Maxwell felt his heart beating a little faster. He advanced with hands extended.

"So you have forgiven me," he cried. "I had hardly hoped for this, Vera. And yet I did nothing. It was no more than a silly piece of vanity. But when I found that Lancing was in deadly earnest——"

"I don't think we need discuss it," Vera said quietly. "Naturally you took the countess to be an honest woman, you had no idea that she was a mere adventuress. What started me on the track was a letter which found its way into my hands by mistake. There was no time to lose, but I could not find you. I could not find Captain Lancing also. You see, I dared not take anybody into my confidence, for there was always the chance that you were implicated. Then I thought of what Ronald Hope had said about the shop girl who was so like me—you see I happened to know who she was. The scheme flashed into my mind and I put it into operation at once. I would go and steal those papers because

I had a pretty good idea where to find them. I knew my way about that house as well as I know about this one. And I was successful beyond my wildest dreams. . . . The rest I have just heard from my uncle. My dear Charlie, what a tale we could tell Europe if we only chose."

But Charlie Maxwell refused to say any more about it. He had had a good lesson and he was going to take it to heart. Meanwhile all was well that ended well, he said. It was a very delicious half hour that passed before a footman announced Miss Jessie Harcourt.

The girls looked wonderfully alike as they stood side by side and Maxwell was fain to admit it. He saw Jessie's eyes gleam and the colour come into her face as Ronald Hope entered. He advanced at once and shook him cordially by the hand.

"'Be you as pure as snow, and as chaste as ice, thou shalt not escape calumny,'" he quoted. "I know there was nothing wrong as far as you were concerned, Maxwell. And Lancing either. They tell me his gambling debts turned his mind, poor fellow. And there were no papers missing after all."

"Not as far as I am concerned," Maxwell said grimly. "The fellows at the club——"

"Consider that you have been infernally badly treated by a mob of newspaper gossips," said Ronald. "By the way, there is an exceedingly handsome apology in to-day's *Mercury*. Everybody is talking about it. I should let the matter stop there if I were you."

Everything fell out exactly as Lord Merehaven had predicted. The evening papers were full of the new Asturian affair. They were glad to find that

Russia had been checkmated and that the appointment of Prince Alix was likely to give satisfaction. They also cherished the fact that King Erno was back in London and that he was looking very ill. The morning papers got their innings in due course with the announcement that ex-King Erno was dead, and that he had died in the night at General Maxgregor's rooms. Dr. Varney had given a certificate of death to the effect that his highness had succumbed to the shock following on his railway accident, and there was no more to be said. The body of the unfortunate prince was going to be embalmed and taken back to his country for burial. Count Gleikstein was puzzled and felt that he had been in some way outwitted, but there was the corpse of the king for him to see, and there, unfortunately for him, was Prince Alix apparently firmly seated on the throne of Asturia. It was impossible for the count at this juncture to hold any sort of communication with either Mazaroff or Countess Saens, seeing that they were both arrested and both had serious charges hanging over them. Russia would have to wait a further opportunity to gratify her designs upon Asturia.

"What will be the upshot of it all?" Ronald Hope asked Jessie as the two of them strolled in the gardens behind Merehaven House a week later. There had been a small dinner-party there and the ex-Queen of Asturia just back from the burial of her husband had been present. Where will *she* end, Jessie?"

Jessie laughed and coloured as she replied to the question. There was nobody near so that she kissed Ronald.

"I hope *she* will end as happily as my trouble is

going to end with you," the girl said softly. "I have seen quite enough of the queen to know where her heart is. I know the temptation that was placed on the shoulders of General Maxgregor that fateful night. He loves the ground that the queen walks on. And she knows it quite as well as I know that you love me, Ronald. She would have kept her secret so long as the throne was fairly under her. But that is all over, and henceforth Queen Margaret and Asturia will be strangers. She feels that she has beaten Russia and that the dynasty is safe with Prince Alix. It was a near thing, but between us we managed to win. Thenceforth the queen will be no more than a subject of King Edward here, and her happiness is in her own hands if she chooses to grip it."

Jessie's voice trailed off to a whisper, for at the same moment ex-Queen Margaret came out of the house down the lane with General Maxgregor by her side. They were talking very earnestly, and they passed by the side of the sundial where Jessie had stood not so many nights before waiting for the signal to come. The queen said something in a broken voice, her head dropped, she held out her hand to Maxgregor who carried it to his lips.

"So that is settled," the involuntary eavesdroppers heard him say. "God bless you for those words, Margaret. I always knew that this would come. And if the passing of the years does not bring——"

There was no more to be heard. Jessie stepped forward and smiled as the queen beckoned her.

"You look very happy, my child," she said. "And Captain Hope! Are you very happy, Jessie?"

"I believe I am the happiest girl in the world," she said in a voice that thrilled. "Oh, so happy, your majesty. I only wish with my heart that you would be the same."

"Do you?" the queen said drily. "It is a secret yet, but—but I am going to . . . try."

THE END.

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